The Death and Resurrection of the Author

The Bible in the Modern World, 51

The Death and Resurrection of the Author and Other Feminist Essays on the Bible

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MARY MAGDALENE IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION:
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This volume of essays is dedicated to wo/men of courage, everywhere,
as they strive to live without fear each day
and to act with integrity, always.
In the moment of their going down into death
may they be accompanied by one like Mary Magdalene.

Anne Diemer Relinquishes her Books

Or tries to.

Having been told but not quite believing it
she has a month

Anne Diemer professor of sociology and women's studies
emeritus University of Windsor

begins to divest herself
of her thousands of books

stacked on tables throughout the farmhouse
in piles on the floor

in her bedroom where the light is low from a lamp on the table
and the pillows stacked so she can breathe.

I'm invited to choose
for my University's library.

Yes, she says, caressing Durkheim, take it
yes to Margaret Mead

But then, well no
I haven't finished this one; that one I might reread

We put some in boxes,
we remove them, we put them in again

Friedan and Steinem and Marilyn French
De Beauvoir and Angels in America

We take and we return
and the stacks are undiminished.

O Anne,
even if you had a reader
more constant than my friend, or your son

to read you through the days and nights beside this lamp
with your hair unbraided and spread upon the pillow

your mind wandering through the alleys
of your beloved trees

laughing, talking with the husband
here in photographs

Even if you had this reader, Anne,
there isn't time for this one shelf

And I think
let them go, Anne,
let these pages flutter from you.

But you are wiser
for now you keep deciding and un-deciding
Yes this one, no not that one

in the face of the dark decisions
about when you are going
and where if anywhere

and why

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Holly E. Hearon

Preface

Jane and I began to discuss the possibility of producing an edited volume of her essays in 2009, already four years after she had been diagnosed with cancer (for a second time) and living beyond the initial projection she had been given by her physician. I knew of a number of essays that were scattered among various feminist volumes and in journals and Jane had some unpublished essays that she had hoped might one day be published. As a teacher and someone keenly interested in Jane's work, I saw real value in collecting these essays in a single volume. We have not included here all of the essays that Jane wrote,[1] and in some instances, one essay has been combined with another when there has been significant overlap in content. When this has been done I have indicated so in a footnote to the essay; in addition, these essays have been given new titles to distinguish them from either of their previous versions. Approximately half of the essays appear here for the first time.

From the beginning, Jane was eager to include some of her poetry in the volume. The result, however, is not 'the collected essays and poems of Jane Schaberg'. The poems have a more integral role, standing in dialogue with the essays. The poems are also one of two ways that we have attempted to contextualize Jane's scholarly work. Although feminist scholars speak about the importance of identifying the values and commitments that shape our work and of locating ourselves in relation to our contexts, this aspect of our work is often given superficial treatment or is edited out. Jane and I were both determined that the present volume would include 'full disclosure'. In addition to the poems, which open and close each of the five parts that make up the volume, each part is introduced by an autobiographical vignette drawn from Jane's own writings. There is no attempt to present a chronology or an autobiographical

1. We elected ultimately to exclude those essays we came to call the 'boot camp' works—those essays you write in order to 'earn' your place in the guild. I have also excluded essays that overlapped significantly with or became the basis for her book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

narrative; rather, the vignettes, like the poems, are meant to disclose Jane's commitments and values and to set her work within the context of her life. It is hoped that readers, in reflecting on how Jane's contexts shaped her scholarly work, will consider similarly the connections between their lives and work.

Jane did not like to talk about herself much. When I observed to her that her so-called autobiographical writings were mostly about other people, she quipped, 'But isn't that how we know ourselves—through other people?' And it is true; we learn a lot about Jane by the way she engaged other people in her chosen context, Detroit—a city often described as the United States' very own 'Third World'. It quickly becomes clear that Jane's scholarship was never far removed from this context. If Jane had had her way, the present volume would include photographs of the neighborhood where she lived in 'the pink house', not far from the now empty train station, which stands as a kind of icon, Babylon—a great city now fallen. Of her students, living in this context, Jane said: 'When we give them a voice, they have a lot to say, and they make us feel irrelevant'.[2]

The volume was initially given the title 'Burning but not Burnt', a line borrowed from the poem with which the volume closes, 'Swing Low' (and which Carolyn Johnson, Jane's god-daughter, read at her memorial service). It was chosen because it vividly captures Jane's tenacity and courage, but also because it evokes the image of words that cannot be, will not be, silenced. Later set aside, it continues, for me, to capture the spirit of this volume.

The volume is divided into five parts, each revolving around a particular area of focus in Jane's work: (1) The Resurrection of the Author (Feminist Hermeneutics); (2) Feminist Translations of the New Testament (writings on women in the New Testament); (3) Mary Magdalene in the Popular Imagination—A Feminist Response (writings on Mary Magdalene in legend, film, and TV); (4) Magdalene Christianity (reconstructive work on Mary Magdalene and her role in early Christianity); (5) Breaking Silence (on intolerance of women's voices and the feminist backlash). There is a kind of dramatic arc to this structure which I think would please Jane with her interest in literature. It begins and closes with essays (and poems) that focus on the importance of voice, and moves from the 'resurrection' of the voice (in Part 1), to its resilience in the face of opposition (Part 5).

2. Notes from our last conversation.

Jane spent her entire academic career at the University of Detroit Mercy.[3] For many years she was the only woman in her department. She was instrumental in establishing a Women's Studies Program and also in promoting the work of her feminist colleagues as well as defending them when they came under attack. She was given the Vagina Warrior Award by the Women's Studies Steering Committee in 2005 and the Distinguished Faculty Award by the University of Detroit Mercy in 2006. She was a member of the Women in the Biblical World Section of the Society of Biblical Literature from 1993 to 2004 and was chair from 1994 to 1998 (co-chairing in 1994). She was also a consulting editor for the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* from 1990 until her death. She traveled widely as a lecturer and will be remembered as one of the 'foremothers' of feminist biblical studies.

I met Jane around 1994 when I was working on my dissertation (*Witness and Counter-Witness: The Mary Magdalene Tradition in Early Christian Communities*).[4] She treated me as a colleague from the first, was always interested in my ideas, and offered encouragement when I felt discouraged. She lent me spunk and emboldened me to transgress boundaries. Our struggles, though similar, were also different, shaped by our particular contexts: Jane was Catholic, I am Protestant; she was not ordained, I am; she was heterosexual, I am a lesbian; she always wanted children (and eventually gained a family through her god-children), I never did; she taught in a university, I teach in a theological seminary. Yet we both know/knew what it was to encounter the subtle (and not so subtle) silencing of women's voices (in our case, white, middle-class voices with advanced academic degrees), experience limitations on access to power, and discover the fractiousness that can arise even within feminist circles. We also bonded around cancer. Jane was first diagnosed with cancer while working on *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*,[5] the cancer that eventually returned or generated anew in 2005. She says in the introduction to *The Resurrection of Jesus* that cancer made her think about death, but if you go back to her Master's thesis, she was already thinking about death, about the loneliness of death, about the existential crisis

3. I did not know for many years that Jane came to academics as a nun, a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart. It was in the novitiate that she read the entire Bible for the first time and discovered, as she put it, that it was great literature. She continued to meet with other members of the order who had also left up until the year before her death.

4. Published by Liturgical Press in 2004.

5. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

posed by death. I was diagnosed with cancer in 2005 and again in 2009. We both underwent mastectomies. Cancer does make you think about death, about mortality. It also helped me to discover internal resources and a courage that I had not thought I had. Jane was instrumental in helping me to make those discoveries.

I last saw Jane two months before her death. I drove to Detroit to work with her on this book. Her world had become confined to her bedroom where she held forth. We worked, papers strewn across the bed which she shared with a dog and two cats—the most recent in a long line of creatures with whom she had shared her home. As always when I talked with Jane, the ideas ranged widely and became grander and grander. Everything was possible. This is how I will remember Jane: Burning but not Burnt.

Holly E. Hearon
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6 June 2012

Train Station*

The Detroit train station
on Michigan Avenue
is powerfully strong.

It will not fall down.
It will not become a mall.

You can see the clouds
in fourteen floors of windows
broken on both sides.

Its entrepreneurial owner
patrolled at night
with a big black mean dog.

But now all the marble is gone
and perhaps he is gone
and the dog.

There is no way to break in.
There is nothing in there.

It is my only church.

* This poem appeared in *Groundwork* (12 December 1994), p. 3.

Part I
The Resurrection of the Author

Prognosis

In 2005 I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, gone to the bone: hips, ribs, spine. Then it progressed to skull, thorax. The prognosis, which I pulled out of a reluctant Dr Haythem Ali, was a mumbled two and a half years. 'From what?' 'From prognosis'. 'To what?' 'Death. But I have a patient with a similar condition who has lived eight years.' He put me on drug after drug and I was able to cope. He is a joyful, confident man who takes care of himself with good vacations, an Iraqi whose parents are here too. We talk about archaeology, his family, my support group, horses (he likes them, especially Arabians, and quoted Koranic verses about their loyalty and intelligence; but he is not much in favor of my riding), his son's interest in Japanese comic books. He spied a letter written to me from Anthony, who was in jail, and asked for the stamp, an unusual one printed right on the envelope. He explains things well, options, side effects, and maintains charts on my progress. We laugh together. He is the perfect doctor for me. I go to Dr Philip Philips ('Philip Squared') at Karmanos for a second opinion at the start of all this; he says, 'You don't look like you're dying', and recommends Haythem's course of treatment.

Tillie Olsen Reads at Wayne State University

Tillie Olson is reading.
There is no microphone.
Her voice riffs in and out
of silence.

She is eighty, two months ago,
And says this may be the only time we meet.
We must make the most of these words.
She is going into silence.

Great grandmother to-be
only head here of crisp white hair,
she buttonholes us to listen,
she gropes for words to fill the silence between her thoughts.

She asks do we know the UN Charter of Human Rights,
and when our silence says we don't
and this is Detroit
she is shocked to quick tears

and she takes time to read it to us:

about the human right to free education
and the right to work
and the right to art
and the right to relax, among others

She is afraid of the silence
She is afraid of our silence
She is afraid for us.

She reads it
and then excerpts from her own work.
Yonnondio, she says, I fought for that title
because it means lament for the lost.

She is afraid for what we have not heard:
Eleanor Roosevelt's voice,
and the voice of the women in the slaughter house,
and the woman at the stove balancing the baby,
and the boss's voice.

Even now, that the voices have been given voice,
even now, that we still don't hear!
But there is no microphone
we can barely hear her.

If I could do this again,
she says,
I will get it right
the next time.

1

The Death and Resurrection of the Author: A Feminist Perspective*

Over the past twenty years I have observed with interest how slowly, slowly, slowly the author herself/himself has come to life in feminist biblical interpretation: that is, how the author has slowly felt it both possible and necessary to come forward with some kind of self-introduction or indication of self-awareness, so that the author as well as the reader might have a clearer sense of what influences the interpretation of the author, and of whom we, the authors, are trying to influence by the questions we ask and the possibilities we entertain. Here, by 'the author' I mean you and me as writers.

We see this slow movement towards self-disclosure in such works as the 1992 collection *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom. The editors initially edited out my remarks about myself, then relented and placed them away from my commentary on Luke, in their introduction, with the comment that 'Several contributors indicated the strong connections between their feminist reading of the Bible and their involvement in issues of social justice'.[1] There I wrote,

> This commentary is based on the conviction that feminism and social justice are inextricably linked, and that it is an urgent task to analyze this Gospel's thinking about women and the poor. The commentary is written in Detroit, which has been called the United States' first Third World city, where the inadequacies of capitalism and the evils of racism and anti-Semitism are daily experienced. It is also written from a position of anguished, stubborn

* This essay was originally delivered as an address to the Midwest Society of Biblical Literature Meeting, 20 February 2004.

1. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1992), p. xvi. In the 1998 expanded edition, see p. xxii.

> membership in the Catholic Church, whose official leaders currently uphold patriarchal values and resist egalitarian, democratic trends in contemporary society. Reading Luke in this context sharpens perceptions of its weaknesses and strengths.[2]

Compare this with the articles in *Searching the Scriptures*, edited by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza a few years later, where personal remarks by contributors were included *in* their commentaries, and with books where the author's stance is sometimes articulated clearly, right up-front, and understood to be a part of the work.

Stephen Moore has been experimenting for years with such integration, as has Jeff Staley in his commentary on John, and many others.[3] Works that explore even more directly and extensively the intersections between the personal and the political, the personal and the critical, the personal and the artistic, are common in other fields such as comparative literature, the classics, and English.[4] This practice is not yet common in our field. For the most part, in biblical studies the personal is confined to the author's photograph, a line or two beneath it, acknowledgments in the introduction or dedication, and occasionally reflections by those in their post-retirement years.[5] We do not yet sufficiently recognize 'that the critic's own story is an important component of the acts of criticism'.[6]

Resurrection of the Author by the Author

Resurrecting the author is, I suggest, of more importance to the author than to the reader, or, at the least, of equal importance. Presupposition-less interpretation and objectivity are myths, and dangerous ones,

2. Ringe and Newsom (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary*, p. xvi.

3. Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994); Jeffrey L. Staley, *Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography and the American West in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

4. See, for example, Judith P. Hallett and Thomas Van Nortwick (eds.), *Compromising Traditions: The Personal Voice in Classical Scholarship* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

5. See, for example, John Dominic Crossan, *Long Way from Tipperary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2000). Contrast this with *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), where Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is interviewed at the height of her career by Fernando Segovia.

6. Hallett and Nortwick (eds.), *Compromising Traditions*, p. 1.

representing flawed ideals. According to these myths, the author is dead, or presumed dead; you and I know that, in reality, the author is only playing dead. The idea of the 'non-existent author' was taken for granted in New Testament studies when I studied with scholars such as Raymond Brown, Lou Martyn, and others. The stated goal was to strive for a disinterested, universal relevance and objectivity. This goal has been perpetuated in the New Criticism where the author of the work being investigated as well as the author of the criticism itself are said not to matter. In place of false claims to 'disinterest' and 'objectivity', feminist scholarship has proposed as a goal striving for fairness to the evidence, knowing that both fairness and evidence depend on who is selecting the evidence to be considered, and who is evaluating it.

For many years I have used Norman Gottwald's 'Self Inventory for Biblical Hermeneutics',[7] which he developed with his students at New York Theological Seminary and to which my own students and I have added each time we use it. Gottwald invites us to consider how a variety of areas impact our interpretation. In addition to questions regarding our ethnicity, gender, social class, education, family influence, community priorities, and political stance, he asks questions directly related to our experience of the Bible and theological stance; for example, In what ways have I been exposed to the Bible? What Bible Translation do I employ? What is my denominational history and tradition regarding interpretation of the Bible? What authoritative criteria does my tradition appeal to beyond the Bible? What is my working theology and how does this differ from the official position of my denomination? What is my orientation towards and experience of biblical scholars and scholarship?[8] To these my students have added such categories as age, ability/disability, nationality, experiences of suffering, experiences of joy.

Through attention to these dimensions of our individual existence, and through listening to others with sometimes startlingly difference experiences and context, we come to sense both the authority of our

7. Norman K. Gottwald, 'Framing Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary: A Student Self-Inventory on Biblical Hermeneutics', in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (ed. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 251-61.

8. Feminist scholars are painfully aware that our writings are not (yet?) required reading for many (perhaps most) other scholars or students, as a glance at footnotes and bibliographies shows, even when the issue discussed has been treated extensively by feminists. We are aware that our work is being ignored, or read carelessly and misrepresented, or appropriated without acknowledgment.

experience, and the fragility and non-finality of what we do as interpreters. We come also to a kind of corporate sense: that ours represent only a limited spectrum within a range of voices.[9] For feminist interpreters, our experiences, insofar as they are the experiences of wo/men,[10] are the place where a liberationist exploration of texts begins. The frame of reference is oppression and the struggles against kyriarchy, as Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, against 'the multiplicative interstructuring of systems of dehumanization'[11] now and in antiquity.

Each of us also knows that our own 'intent' as authors—what we think we are doing, what we want to do and mean to do in our work, even what we are not sure about doing—is fragile, is swept aside by some (maybe most) readers, is thought to be negligible, of little or no import. Still, it matters to us. It is an aspect of our motivation. It matters when a reviewer gets it 'wrong', when a student 'misreads' even if it is a strong and interesting misreading. It matters to us that our books and articles may live in the minds of others, or may die, might even in some instances beyond our own individual careers be 'resurrected' or rediscovered. It matters, but there is nothing we can do about it.

I have learned something about this through my participation in the Detroit Writers Guild, where over the years I have presented, workshopped and re-worked my poetry. One of the members of the guild early on advised me that the author must come forward; the reader wants to know the author. Otherwise, where is all of this coming from—all this involvement, all this perspective on the teeming life of the street, its sadness and its hilarious moments? I was surprised. I thought I had come forward. I resisted and still resist. I reinvent, revise myself, creating new ways and places to hide. Bringing the author forward is painful, embarrassing, dangerous. You become vulnerable to all sorts of assaults when the mask of the omniscient narrator (like that of the uninvolved, unbiased critic) slips or is removed.

One can and will be accused of egotism, pomposity, self-indulgence, self-interest. These terms are taken from a recent online review of my

9. We become 'more magnanimous toward our colleagues because we recognize the fact that unique factors have also shaped their voices' (Susan T. Wiltshire, 'The Authority of Experience', in Hallett and Nortwick [eds.], *Compromising Traditions*, pp. 168-81 [180]).

10. I.e., all women and non-elite men.

11. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 61-62.

book, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*.[12] The reviewer was angered, enraged, by my introduction, my self-indulgent interest in Virginia Woolf, and my account of my experiences at Migdal (Magdala). She berated me for 'taking 80 pages' to get to the business of biblical criticism. I think of egotism, pomposity, self-indulgence, and so on as real dangers; and there is the real possibility also of just being disliked. There is also the danger of losing sight of the work we are interpreting. But coming forward (or resurrecting) is worth the risk of falling into these traps. I can no longer agree with an editor friend who years ago dissed the work of those beginning to come forward with the comment: 'who really cares about who they are?' I do. More and more of us do. For better or worse, the reader must learn to gauge the effect of our own story (that is, the author's own story) on our efforts to interpret other stories.

The hidden or hiding author/interpreter is never really hidden and never really uninteresting to the reader, especially when a work is controversial. Let me use an example from my own life. My book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Interpretation of the New Testament Infancy Narratives* (1987/1994), although well received in some quarters, was also broadly attacked. The traditional reading of these texts understands them to describe a virginal conception. My reading suggests, instead, that they describe an illegitimate pregnancy in the period between betrothal and marriage, which, because of allusions to the law in Deut. 22.23-27, may have been regarded as the product of a rape. The theological dimension of my thesis was to suggest that the point being made by Matthew and Luke in their different ways (and in the tradition behind them) was that God stands by the endangered woman and child: in Matthew by claiming that the child is 'of the Holy Spirit' and Emmanuel (God with us); in Luke by claiming that the child is 'Son of the Most High'.

One attack on my book was particularly interesting: Raymond Brown wondered whether my interpretation of the virginal conception tradition, so highly developed in the Roman Catholic Church, might have been prompted by my negative experience in a Roman Catholic religious community many years ago, that is, whether it reflected a destructive bitterness. I responded in an article in the *Journal for the Feminist Study of Religion* that a question he did not ask, and that, perhaps, might have been the better question, was whether or not I had ever been raped.[13] My

12. Mount St Agnes Theological Center for Women.

13. Jane Schaberg, 'Feminist Interpretations of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew', *JFSR* 13 (1997), pp. 35-62.

point is that I was reading the text from the point of view of an experience common to women living with male violence. This exchange made me realize all the more how important it is to come forward as an author. In this way, reader response criticism comes to include the response of reviewers, which in turn, becomes subject to scholarly analysis.

The Resurrection of the Authors We Read

Up to this point I have been speaking about us as authors. What about the authors we read? It is, for some, passé to talk about the 'intent' of biblical writers, to hanker after glimpses of this intent, to think one's reading might be controlled in some way by it or that it might provide a playing field on which to play, and a sense of when one has run—accidentally or willingly—outside of the lines.[14] Trained as I was I can never quite stop asking what an author might have meant: asking why this particular choice of words or why this apparent gross or subtle editing of a source. Scott Greenblatt writes of 'the desire to speak with the dead'.[15] I take that frisson of pleasure when one thinks, rightly or wrongly, that one has 'spoken with the dead' as a sort of resurrection.

Let me give two examples that have fascinated me in this regard. Most agree that Matthew has inserted the names of four women into the genealogy in chap. 1. Are we asking about authorial intent when we ask why these particular four women? My second example comes from Luke. *If* Luke is editing Mark, what is going on when Luke transforms Mark's story (chap. 14) about a woman prophet anointing Jesus' head into the story about 'a woman of the city, a sinner' anointing Jesus' feet, weeping, and being forgiven (Lk. 7), and omits the line 'Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (Mk 14.9)? I have found that asking such questions as these about intent provokes in me not only an interest in the author, but, even more, an interest in how the author is struggling with others (other voices, other ideas, other perspectives, other people with intents). And, of

14. The organizer of this session, Troy Martin, remarked in an email exchange how often scholars appeal to 'what Paul meant' in papers and presentations; he wondered whether this desire to cling to authorial intent may be a way of trying to avoid discontinuity in the transmission of tradition. His question to me was to what extent this claim to 'authorial intent' has any validity.

15. Scott Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 1, quoted by Susan Lochrie Graham and Stephen D. Moore, 'The Quest of the New Historicist Jesus', *BibInt* 5 (1997), pp. 438-64 (438).

course, the struggle of the interpreter is *with* the author, especially when what seems to be the author's intent is perceived as dangerous, insulting, less than moral.[16]

This brings us to what I think is a very important development in feminist scholarship: an understanding of authorship as something that is corporate. This development is particularly evident in studies of Paul. The effort to delineate and understand Paul's thought in relation to positions taken by Paul's 'opponents' is, of course, an old one. What is new here are two things: first, seeing the authorship of these letters not as a single voice, but as a diversity of voices and views that have given rise to the occasion of the letter; and second, the positive valuing of the perspectives held by Paul's opponents (for example, Anne Wire's treatment of the women of Corinth as prophetic participants in an egalitarian form of religion).[17] In this way, the author is resurrected not as the great, individual genius or hero, but as a web of relationships.

An example of this is found in the article by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, 'Rethinking Authorship in the Letters of Paul: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Model of Pauline Theology', in the recently published Festschrift, *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom*. She shows how attention can be refocused beyond Paul: beyond Paul as the single, central author and one authority of the letters, to the theological expressions (and intentions) of other Christians that can be heard in the letters. Paul is understood as 'a prophetic voice who can be challenged by other inspired speakers'.[18] Kittredge contrasts this approach with that of the Society of Biblical Literature's Pauline Theology Group's (1986–95) 'single author model'. 'Imagining the locus of Paul's theology to be in his own mind [as the Group did and does] means that efforts to reconstruct the process are focused individually rather than socially'.[19] In contrast, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, followed by Kittredge and others, uses the traditions

16. Such questions become theologically fraught if God is considered to be the author of the text.

17. Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). See also her commentary on 1 Corinthians in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures*. II. *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 153-95. Cf. my essay 'Magdalene Christianity', in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds—Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs; New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 193-220.

18. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, 'Rethinking Authorship in the Letters of Paul: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's Model of Pauline Theology', in Matthews, Kittredge, and Johnson-Debaufre (eds.), *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom*, pp. 318-33 (319).

19. Kittredge, 'Rethinking Authorship', p. 322.

cited by Paul—most importantly, Gal. 3.26-28—to reconstruct the environment of debate and discussion. Wire sees that baptismal formula as an expression of the self-understanding of the women prophets in Corinth; Kittredge attributes the pre-Pauline Philippians hymn to the community, understanding it as an expression of 'authors' whose names we do not know and whose thought should not be subordinated to Paul's. 'Once diversity within the functioning Christian communities is accepted as an imaginative possibility', writes Kittredge, 'then one is able to reconstruct these positions as Christian visions of community with which Paul is in dialogue, rhetorically trying to encourage, modify, or circumscribe'.[20] One can honor perspectives not in harmony with Paul; can decenter and relativize Pauline authority. When congregations are seen not as either passively accepting his teaching or heretically opposing it, they can be seen as creative 'authors' in communities of dialogue and deliberation and disagreement: of conversation. When the author Paul is viewed as a participant, but not the center, of the conversation, so too can other 'authors' be viewed as participants in the conversation. And so, too, the scholar/critic. Kittredge sees this conversation as a model that can function to democratize contemporary interpretive communities.[21] Intent becomes one among many intents—not just the minds that are involved, but the material lives, the varied experiences—all interacting. This understanding of authorship can be seen as a 'resurrection': not of the individual author, but of the corporate body.

I think this may provide an avenue for a future direction of Gospel research and in the 'search for the historical Jesus' if it is possible to de-center Jesus as the individual hero,[22] if egalitarianism is taken seriously, if the canon is expanded and deepened. In contrast to a fixation on original intent, literary sources, and individual authorship, Werner Kelber sees the Gospels as the result of a vital compositional productivity, 'a balanced negotiation of compositional intentionality with tradition', in which some instances of Synoptic verbal agreement may be evidence not of literary dependence but of oral retelling (following James Dunn).[23] Kelber sees in the construction of the gospels 'evidence of intended selectivity, judicious valuation, and deliberate composition. It is, therefore, increasingly apparent that each gospel is the result of a

20. Kittredge, 'Rethinking Authorship', p. 326.

21. Kittredge, 'Rethinking Authorship', p. 331.

22. See in this volume, 'Magdalene Christianity', and 'Further Reflections on Magdalene Christianity'.

23. Werner Kelber, 'The Two-Source Hypothesis: Oral Tradition, the Poetics of Gospel Narrativity, and Memorial Arbitration', unpublished paper, 2003.

compositional oversight and a distinctly focused rhetorical outreach.'[24] They are 'literary compositions with deep diachronic roots in oral and written traditions', works with 'internal dynamics and intrinsic causations' that 'plug into cultural memory for the purpose of benefiting the present'.[25] They are the result of an oral and collaborative process which we do not understand.[26]

I understand the point—of resurrection of the authors we read and of ourselves as authors writing—to be political and urgent. Jeffrey Kripal has noted that the quest for historical probability or for 'what really happened' is 'almost certainly an impossible goal, if not an illusion, and sometimes (maybe often) it can hide a lurking fundamentalism or literalism, as if one can only be religious by knowing *exactly* what happened in the past in order to deny that one is in fact responsible for creating new meanings in the present'.[27] I am interested in that phrase 'in order to deny that'. There is a connection between insisting on objectivity and certainty, with regard to the past, and denying creative responsibility, with respect to the present. What is this, politically? An acceptance of the status quo, a disconnect, a disassociation. In a post-9/11, post-holocaust world, the tools we have are necessary for the dismantling of fundamentalism, and for showing how fundamentalism uses religion for violent, grasping purposes.[28] Our personal experience, of oppression, of resistance and resilience, and as citizens of the US—of being a part of and benefitting from both its experiments in democracy and its empire-building global domination—cries out for analysis. In the words of womanist theologian Stephanie Mitchem, 'I cling only to my renewed commitment to a professional principle that we are obliged in all our work, ethnographic and historical, to be as clear as possible about our confused location; to be as attentive as possible to our continually shifting position. And in that reflexivity is all the comfort available to interpreters.'[29] 'To be as clear as possible about our confused location; to

24. Kelber, 'The Two-Source Hypothesis'.

25. Kelber, 'The Two-Source Hypothesis'.

26. As an example of resurrecting oral storytellers, see Holly Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

27. Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 162.

28. See Betsy Reed (ed.), *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror* (New York: Nation Books, 2002).

29. Quoted by Thomas A. Tweed, 'Between the Living and the Dead: Fieldwork, History, and the Interpreter's Position', in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the*

be as attentive as possible to our continually shifting position'—this commitment, I think, could help us to shuffle to the place of dialogue and listening, with others who have shuffled, are shuffling, to that place from so many different locations.

Ethnography of Religion (ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire; New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 73.

2

Fidelity in Feminist Translation of the New Testament*

I approach the topic of New Testament translation from my own particular context and the questions of loyalty that it prompts. I am a white, currently un-churched, Roman Catholic of middle-class background. I am also a tenured academic. For the past twelve years I have lived (by chance and then by choice) in one of the poorest and most desolate neighborhoods of Detroit. It is a neighborhood composed of blacks and whites of underclass and lower class, many of whom are trapped here economically, and of a dwindling number of 'Peace and Justice' people who keep their incomes below the taxable range and work with the mentally disabled, with Central American refugees, and with anti-nuclear and anti-death penalty movements. Crack deals and fire-bombings, family violence and destruction, and the abuse, neglect, and death of children take place before our eyes, and so too do events of extraordinary courage and beauty. This is a place where I experience what Delores Williams calls 'demonarchy'.[1] I stay because of the relationships that are possible here (though communication is extremely difficult), and because of unfinished intellectual business, part of which concerns the Bible. I hear this book used in our neighborhood by the black church on the corner, by those interested in liberation theologies, and by some not at all. The tensions, opportunities, and problems my context offers are, I think, fairly typical of the contexts in which many of us who do feminist biblical criticism find ourselves, although the specific circumstances may differ.

* This essay is drawn from 'Reply to E.A. Castelli and C.J. Martin on Feminist Translation of the New Testament', *JFSR* 6 (1990), pp. 74-85.

1. Delores S. Williams, 'The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue', *JRT* 43 (1986), pp. 42-58 (54). The encounter is with radical evil, with the social organization of white patriarchy that intends the degradation and destruction of black women and their male and female children.

Context raises the issue of language: What languages are spoken in the worlds and neighborhoods we inhabit and by those to whom we want to speak and listen? Which of these languages can we, need we, learn? Can the Bible be translated into those languages, and into our mother-tongue (if such exists), the language of women—or rather, the languages of women of different races and classes? Can we speak to each other about and by means of this book? How do the decisions and actions of our lives relate to this speaking or attempt to speak?

Feminists, and womanists because of their different experiences, speak different languages of concern with respect to translation. I feel the frustrating desire to understand and speak both. Both challenge us to consider the important question of fidelity: but to what and to whom? I want to engage this matter by reflecting on five issues: cost, aim, subversion, sexual imagery of translation, and creativity, returning finally to the issue of fidelity.

Cost

Elizabeth Castelli has rightly claimed that 'many women who are grounded in the Christian tradition (and we should add, the Jewish tradition) have spent much of their religious lives in radical acts of translation of the tradition. One might well ask', she says, 'At what cost?'[2] The cost for some of us has been a heavy one, involving waste and what Mary Daly calls 'spirit-shed', the attempt to 'dialogue with mindless patriarchs'.[3] Awareness of that cost can involve a sense of having been duped, resulting in tremendous anger. Anger, however, is a great resource,[4] one, for example, that has been effectively employed by womanists.

In addition to cost, the benefits side must be tallied as well: this effort has trained many women as translators, and as persons able to intuit moments of transcendence in a text or tradition. They are able to

2. Elizabeth Castelli, 'Les belles infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism? The Meanings of Feminist Biblical Translation', *JFSR* 6 (1990), pp. 25-39 (25).

3. Mary Daly, *Quintessence… Realizing the Archaic Future: A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), pp. 121, 140.

4. Carol Maier, 'A Woman in Translation, Reflection', *Translation Review* 17 (1985), pp. 4-8 (6), notes that as she became 'a stronger, more antagonistic reader and translator [her] identification was becoming less automatic and less submissive'. Whereas in her first translations she was unaware that by responding as if she were the 'you' of the poems of Cuban-born Octavio Armand, she was at times not asserting her textual knowledge but merging with the images of the poet.

double-think their way into texts that exclude or ignore them, able to imagine the experience of men. These developed talents must not be ignored as we develop others.[5] What, besides human ingenuity and the desire to belong, makes it possible for women to think their way into the Bible?

Aim

I see feminist New Testament translation as a woman-centered translation, done by those who have stepped outside of patriarchal thought and religion. It is translation that is done for the purposes of creating and strengthening feminist consciousness, for those having trouble breathing: our 'asthmatic sisters' as Castelli calls them.[6] Yet I do not see translation as supplying the oxygen, because that would require profound social change.

Inclusive translation, in contrast to feminist translation, provides solace and functions as a friendly critic of institutional and liturgical patriarchalism. It shows how women can and have heard and read themselves as *in*cluded. Feminist translation, as I see it, highlights the *ex*clusion (at least of the deliberate kind) and the androcentrism of the biblical text. It mimics and even mocks the loud male voice and tone; it turns up the volume on its evasions and lies and guilt, adding dots and slashes to mark the gaps and omissions in the text. It facilitates reading between the lines and stories, helping the reader find fragments of women's experience that were not completely erased, enabling us to reach back to options that have been lost.

Feminist translation, by showing that the New Testament embodies the myth of patriarchy, 'the myth that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization',[7] enables us to take on the project of a new demythologizing. In its assumption that women were central to the

5. Clarice Martin speaks of the practice of blacks imagining themselves as included in 'so-called generic representations of Americans'. She is here looking at benefits for the black community, not the cost ('Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation', *JFSR* 6 [1990], pp. 41-61 [44]).

6. Castelli, 'Les belles infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism?', pp. 25-39.

7. 'Male patriarchal writing, in its aggressiveness, often rings with guilt for its history of robbing women of language and art' (Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger* [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988], p. 218). The accounts of the women reporting or not reporting the emptiness of the tomb of Jesus are good examples of texts that ring with guilt.

New Testament story, feminist translation (as does inclusive translation) contradicts the biblical claim of our marginality. It adopts a strategy that points out that *that claim is being* made, and points to its error.

Subversion

I think it is not only possible, but also necessary, that a feminist translation in some way subverts the text. For example, a subversive translator would want to find a way to signal boldly (probably against the intention of the writer of Luke) that Lk. 23.49 tampers with the tradition of who was present at the crucifixion of Jesus. The RSV translates: 'And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things'. But the participle at the end of the sentence is feminine plural: *horōsai*. The Greek does not claim that the men (*pantes hoi gnōstoi autō*, whom Luke has added, and who, most think, are meant to include the apostles) witnessed anything at all—only that they stood at a distance.[8] In this case, the translator would be faithful to the text, or the tradition under it that can be glimpsed, and not faithful to the probable intent of the author.[9]

Feminist translation, I think, must also amplify the whispers of women that can be heard in certain places in or under the biblical text, that 'steady undercurrent in the oral tradition' of anonymous voices.[10] For example, H. Schürmann raises the question of whether the stories involving women in Lk. 7.11-17 (widow at Nain), 7.36-50 (woman with ointment), and 8.2-3 (woman on the road with Jesus) might not at one time have formed a narrative complex arising from a *Sitz im Leben* in the early community as it sought to address concerns about the presence and role of women.[11] The translator who is convinced that this is so should

8. J.A. Fitzmyer's commentary (*The Gospel according to Luke* [AB, 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985], p. 1515) ignores this point, while noting that the role of witnesses is important in Lucan theology, and 'in a sense begins here in a special way'. Testimony is an essential part of the motifs of commissioning and discipleship (p. 243). There is wide disagreement among other commentators about the grammatical correctness or incorrectness of the Greek of this verse.

9. The close readings done by Phyllis Trible in *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) have shown examples of distance between Hebrew text and previous emendators/translators (Gen. 21.16c [p. 24]; Judg. 11.39d [p. 106]; Judg. 19.30 [p. 81]) and perhaps authors.

10. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 226.

11. H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), p. 448. Fitzmyer (*Luke*, p. 698) finds this question 'too problematic to give anything but a speculative answer', so he drops it.

find a way to signal that connection. There are voices trapped in the text, moaning and groaning in such a way that it would take an Elizabeth Swados or a Laurie Anderson to make them audible.

It is necessary also for the feminist translator to mark and point out the silence with regard to women, the absence of their stories, and many of their concerns. There are, for example, no call stories of women in the New Testament. The clearest way of drawing attention to that fact would be to print a title, 'The Call of the Women Disciples', at the top of a blank page. Such a gesture would make it a little more possible for the reader to imagine women included in the crowd of disciples, that is, to read the terms *mathētai*, *apostoloi*, and *adelphoi* as generics.[12] Even after inclusive language changes have been made to the text, it is not true that 'all who hear will know themselves to be equal', as the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee claimed or hoped.[13] It will not be true because of what is missing in the text as we have it, as well as what is still there defying inclusion. While I believe that feminist translation is a partner of inclusive translation, it also points to the incompleteness of inclusive translation. We need both to begin to understand how women have heard and hear the biblical materials.[14]

12. See E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 45.

13. See the introduction to *An Inclusive Language Lectionary: Readings for Year A* (Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983). Susan Thistlethwaite, Sharon Ringe, and others recognize that inclusive language is only part of a larger task.

14. Inclusive translation builds on the best feminist interpretation and translation to reflect (1) our best knowledge of the historical situations in which the texts were produced and to which the texts refer; (2) the inclusive mentality that is considered trapped sometimes in androcentric language (e.g., 'brethren' when clearly men and women are addressed); (3) experiments based on contemporary dissatisfaction with the biblical metaphors (when they have become, in Derrida's words, 'white metaphors'—metaphors mistaken for reality). Feminist translation builds on inclusive translation, by incorporating its successful efforts, but also by moving into the areas of its failures. Inclusive God-talk is only an initial stage of the movement toward real inclusivity. Once we substitute the pronoun 'she' in many theological texts of the West, we find that the rest of the sentence no longer fits. We become uncomfortable juxtaposing some warrior images and hierarchical notions of power over others with the talk of the deity as female. This discomfort drives us back into the tradition to uncover theological veins that are minor and not central; and it drives us to search outside the traditions and in our own experience and creativity for words and images that ring true. Highlighting the discomfort is, I think, the main task at this time of feminist translation.

Sexual Imagery of Translation

Discussions of translation are shot through with masculine and feminine imagery, with the original text (and/or its author) usually thought of in paternal terms and translation sometimes considered a feminine and derivative practice. According to Lori Chamberlain, what is at stake for the translator is the usurping of the paternal role of the original writer.[15] Harold Bloom's poetics of belatedness offers an example of this: employing the language of the male *agōn*, he describes translation as an Oedipal conflict between the belated interpreter-son and canonical precursor-father, who must be overthrown in order for there to be room for the son.[16] It is very interesting to note also the imagery employed by some male translators who speak of the text to be translated as a woman who needs to be tamed.[17] All of this is based on what some male translators have said was at stake for them.

Is it possible to speak of notions of authorship and authority without hierarchies and without violence?[18] At least one feminist translator *has* spoken of her work in this strikingly different way; Marcia Falk writes in *Love Lyrics from the Bible*, her translation of the Song of Songs, that:

> Translation is a kind of journey: a 'carrying across' from one cultural-linguistic context to another… Deciding to translate means willingly risking departure as the first step in a not entirely foreseeable sequence. Having departed from a text by deciding to translate it, by envisioning its shape and sound in language

15. Lori Chamberlain, 'Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation', *Signs* 13 (1987/88), pp. 456-68. Cited by Castelli, 'Les belles infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism?', p. 32.

16. Bloom elaborates an anxiety of influence in which poets engage in a dialectical-historical struggle, each making room for himself by breaking off with his precursor, usurping the inheritance, stealing the power. The claim is to revise and purify the tradition from error, but in fact the predecessor is overthrown. The strong imagination comes to its painful birth through savagery, misreading, and misrepresentation. The root of this anxiety is despair over not having been self-begotten, not being one's own father, ultimately an attempt to overcome death and capture the power of giving life (*Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1997], p. 182; C. Ozick, 'Judaism and Harold Bloom', *Commentary* [Jan. 1979], pp. 43-51 [46-47]).

17. Castelli, 'Les belles infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism?', p. 32. George Steiner describes a fourfold process of translation modeled on male experience of intercourse or rape (*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* [London: Oxford University Press, 1975], p. 300.

18. Castelli writes that 'the tradition to which we are ambivalent heirs often finds itself incapable of speaking of these notions except through hierarchies and violence' ('Les belles infidèles/Fidelity or Feminism?', p. 34).

> not its own, the translator's next move is toward the text again, into its subtleties and details, its flaws, peculiarities, and perfections… But then, once intimacy is established, the translator leaves again, taking another step away from the text, back into the self, to begin the utterance that will be the new work… Thus the process of translation is a to-and-fro voyage, toward and away from the shores of the text, until finally there is a new land on which to disembark.[19]

Quite a different pattern is described here: risking departure, movement back toward the text to reestablish intimacy, departure again into the self, and, finally, new land on which to disembark. Falk's description, however, is of work on a beloved text, which she believes expresses a pre-sexist, pre-patriarchal vision. What of the texts that are sexist, and/or that do not come alive in our own voices?[20] Our relationship with the biblical 'fathers' (and mothers, as in 'mother church') needs to be recast in feminist terms: terms of inheriting the biblical tradition in a dialectical tension between continuity and rebellion.

Creativity

I see feminist translation as, in many ways, doing something similar to what the rabbinic tradition did, but on a very different basis. Susan Handelman, in *The Slayers of Moses*—a book which I find has many links with feminist theory—analyzes the radical nature of rabbinic revisionist interpretation, a revolution from within. This interpretation is born of the tension between continuity and rebellion, tradition and innovation, attachment to the text and alienation from it. It dives deep into what was not explicitly written, the text within the text: cherishes its incompleteness, its openness, its nature as a method of inquiry into the right, rather than a codified set of answers—a system.[21]

19. Marcia Falk, *Love Lyrics from the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), pp. 54-55.

20. See Susan Schnur, 'Reshaping Prayer: An Interview with Marcia Falk', *Lilith* 20 (1988), pp. 10-15. Falk describes how in 1980 she attempted to translate a sequence of psalms but was not able to make them come alive in her own voice. The Lord God King of the Universe presiding over it all was a 'boulder' she could not get beyond. She describes also how at one point she was unable to say the words of the synagogue prayers anymore. After she started experimenting with her own blessings and with feminine language, she started reading biblical texts again, especially drawn to what they reflect of the landscape of Israel, drawn to nonhuman images of the divine.

21. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982). See also Simon Rawidowicz, 'On Interpretation', and 'Israel's Two Beginnings', in *Studies in Jewish Though* (ed. N. Glatzer; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974), pp. 45-80, 81-209.

But in rabbinic interpretation, each new interpretation was thought to be an uncovering of what was latent in the text, and thus only an extension of it. In feminist interpretation and translation we are keenly aware that everything is *not* latent in the Bible and that in very serious ways we were never 'within' the tradition at all. Or better, we were and we were not. Carol Maier, in a fascinating article called 'A Woman in Translation, Reflecting', writes of her growing awareness of the absence and presence of the mother in the Spanish poems of Octavio Armand:

> This was a new kind of textual desire…where not the text itself…but something absent from the text was evoking a response… I wanted the mother to be present… I wanted to be translating her defense not her dismissal, and even though I respected the text for its ability to arouse such a strong response, to create such a 'present' absence, my antagonism was stronger than my respect, for I suspected that the text, busy as it was with its patriarchal birth, was 'unaware' that it could also engender a different, female experience such as mine. On further reflection… I find that my antagonism is not turning me from Armand's work but freeing me in relation to it… I want to answer back…summon the absent mother and give voice to her… There is also a further thought, or hunch, that keeps me translating, and this is my suspicion—that the desire for the mother the text aroused in me is a desire that is very strong in the text itself, albeit in a rather different way. I sense that as I developed as a translator of Armand's poems and essays, I have gradually become the reader they requested, an integral yet distinct element of themselves…the strong, articulate female whose lack they have both created and lamented.[22]

The idea is important—'the reader they requested'—even unknowingly.[23]

What does this mean for feminist translators of the Bible? Perhaps it means not that feminists wish to usurp the Bible, but to produce the writing—*a* writing, *the* writing—which is a spiritual resource for women as well as men. Or which is *the*—or *a*—word of God/Goddess. That, I believe, will happen, is happening. We are participating in a movement of tremendous social and intellectual change, which eventually, down the generations of economic, historical, institutional struggle, will produce, if it has not already, not only a Shakespeare's sister (whom

22. 'And as I write about that lack I understand how deeply Armand's texts desire precisely the approach a translator is capable of providing: an affectionate but assertive antagonism that enables them to be born—betrayed but truly—in another language' ('A Woman in Translation', pp. 4-8 [7]).

23. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes has similarly documented how the Afro-Christian folktext tradition, expanding Ps. 68, 'summons the absent mother' ('"Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless": Power, Gender, and Community in an Afrocentric Biblical Tradition', *Semeia* 47 (1989), pp. 57-85.

Virginia Woolf anticipated), but also a woman-identified sister of Moses, a sister of Mark, a sister of Jesus, to give powerful expression to the religious experiences of women, to God/Goddess's words for women.[24]

Fidelity

What, then, does it mean to speak of a faithful feminist or womanist translation? Faithful to whom or to what? Fidelity judged by whom and on what basis? I think we must be the judges of our own fidelity to the tradition. We must determine if our translation is fair, informed by the best scholarship, open to improvement. Feminist translation and womanist translation should be faithful to what feminists and womanists judge good and wholesome, judge evil or incomplete, in the Bible. This means that we produce translation that is open to what lies beneath and beyond the text. Falk, as we have seen, speaks of translation as a journey back and forth from text to self, which must try to create a whole, authentic voice of its own. She says translation should be as faithful as the translator can make it, to (a) the translator's understanding of the original text, and (b) her or his 'feeling for it'[25]—whether, I think, that feeling is admiration, anger, emptiness, restlessness, or love.

Feminist and womanist translations and interpretations, in presenting us (directly or indirectly) with the poverty of the biblical tradition, make us conscious of our need for and right to more. They throw us back not only on texts from all sources and periods, to expand and correct the biblical tradition, but also on our own imagination and courage, giving us

24. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957), pp. 68-69: 'For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice'. Woolf thought that the conditions that make masterpieces possible are: having predecessors in one's art; being one of a group where art is freely discussed and practiced; and having the utmost freedom of action and experience (*New Statesman*, October 16, 1920). The predecessors are important for the establishment of historical identity and continuity, for the myth of our own creative origins (see Marcus, *Art and Anger*, p. 98). Marcus suggests that for the character of Miss LaTobe, in Woolf's *Between the Acts*, Woolf 'reaches further back in history than Shakespeare's sister… She is the sister of the anonymous writers of the Bible', with her pageant and her ambitious plans for rewriting Genesis (Marcus, 'Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny', in *The Representation of Women in Fiction* [ed. C.G. Heilbrun and M.R. Higonnet; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983], pp. 60-97 [90]). It is significant that Woolf made Judith Shakespeare Shakespeare's sister, not his daughter (as in William Black's 1883 novel).

25. Falk, *Love Lyrics*, pp. 58, 61.

the power to speak for ourselves. As Rosemary Ruether puts it, 'The past provides us only with a dark mirror on which to throw our own shapes but yields no developed texts by which to verify our imagination. Better then to claim that imagination as our own.'[26]

Feminist and womanist translations help the reader decide which aspects of the biblical tradition should be reclaimed and which rejected, and help free us from what Woolf called 'unreal loyalties' to gender, church, religion[27]—and, I add, text. Should I add race? No. Womanist translation and interpretation tell us that for people of color, race is not now an 'unreal loyalty', but it too quickly becomes an unreal loyalty for whites. Womanist theory teaches white feminism that it must examine white racism, must examine the white role in slavery and in our terrible time. I would say feminism and womanism *are* fidelity—in fact, are the *only* ways to be faithful: to the ambiguous text, to the traditions behind it, within it, to our histories, for some to the God it points to (if not always in the biblical authors' experience of that God), and to our independent, distinct, interdependent selves and families. In the words of Clarice Martin, this is all about survival.[28] I agree.

26. R.R. Ruether, *Womanguides* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. x. For an example of imagination fueled by the Bible, see the poetry of Alicia Ostriker, 'We'll Never Read the Bible the Same Way Again: Revisionist Myth-Making', *Lilith* 14 (1989), pp. 17-20.

27. V. Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938), pp. 78-79. Concerning religion: Sharon Ringe considers the intrinsic authority of Scripture as due to its 'performative' character: the language of Scripture 'does not simply provide information, but rather proclaims, bears witness, evokes a response, and leads to engagement in the same experience or pattern of relationship with God as that which engaged the original authors'. But what if the experience or pattern of relationship is *not* the same? One would expect, I think, deep structural changes in the religion that still regarded the Bible in some way as 'Scripture' ('Standing Toward the Text', *Theology Today* 43 [1986–87], pp. 552-57 [553]).

28. Martin, 'Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament', pp. 41-61.

3

Dancing while Teaching: Using *Wisdom Ways**

Teaching always takes place within and in response to particular contexts. For this reason I want to begin by describing the context in which I have used the book, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. I am using it in Detroit. While Detroit is attempting a comeback, and has some lovely areas, it is still 'America's first Third World city', as you can see in Eminem's movie *Eight Mile*. The movie is named for the border between the city and the wealthy suburbs beyond it; my university is located at the 'Six and a Half Mile' point. The city is eighty-three percent black, and its poor population is becoming poorer and poorer.

The Course Participants

Because of registration problems, my class (a 500 graduate level course) ended up with only a few students. So, I decided to hold it, against regulations, in my living room, where we could bring food and drink and have a fire going in the fireplace. This was my first act of transgression. Because of the low enrollment, I allowed undergraduates to take the course at a 300 level. This was my second transgression. We met one evening a week for three hours. No one in the class was familiar with anyone else—except me—before we began.

Feminist and liberationist pedagogies train us to get to know our students well. The informal setting in my living room along with the incorporation of students' questions and voices in Schüssler Fiorenza's book facilitated this. As is usual at my university, there was a wide range of talent, academic preparation, and commitments among my students. There was also a wide range in terms of finances. *Wisdom Ways* costs only $20—but that and the other books were too expensive for one embarrassed student, who skillfully kept the fact hidden

until the course was well along. Every time that happens I become angry with myself for not discussing expenses and ways of sharing books at the beginning of a class. I have changed the names and modified the descriptions of my students:

> *Terri* is a Baptist woman for whom this was a first Religious Studies course. Her registration in the course was something of an accident. She is pursuing an MA in counseling and has clients from different religious backgrounds.
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> *Joan* is a white woman who teaches at a progressive Roman Catholic high school, and considers herself less progressive and less creative than her colleagues. She describes her relationship to the Catholic church as complex, and cannot call herself a feminist because of her Catholicism and her opposition to abortion. She is close to completing her MA in Religious Studies.
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> *John* is a Lutheran graduate student who drives from Toledo. He is also a technical writer who has had experience teaching adult classes at his church, where he is choir director. This was his first course in Biblical Studies.
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> *Justin* is of Caucasian American Indian descent who converted last year to Roman Catholicism in a ceremony fraught with ambiguities. He is an enthusiastic graduate student who wants to go on in Biblical Studies. He describes himself as a feminist, and also speaks of the cost to him of this commitment.
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> *Carolyn* is an undergraduate Religious Studies major, and pregnant with her second child. The wife of a successful businessman, she comes from what she describes as a poor white trash background. She lives in the suburbs and has only recently developed an interest in religion.
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> *Lashanda* is a single mother of two young boys (one of whom is seriously ill with anemia and asthma), living on the edge financially and emotionally. She was in this class because she became fascinated by the heated arguments in another class of mine, 'Women and Religion'. She is an undergraduate majoring in education, and wants to teach grade school math.
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> *Gloria* is a deep thinker who has studied racism and is proud of her ethnicity. She works in the Post Office, but has become sick of it. After completing her MA, she is considering going into the ministry, or teaching.
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> *Norene* is a quiet woman whose comments and questions are often zingers, right on target. She wants to go on in graduate Religious Studies (but will subsequently drop out because of emotional problems).
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> *Jennifer* is a dental hygiene major, and is taking the class to fulfill a core requirement. Unhindered by her lack of preparation for this course, she often anticipated the insights of Trible.
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> *Marliyn*, an MD who drives a Mercedes, is a Religious Studies graduate student who has the training and ability to make a fine teacher of Biblical Studies. She misses a lot of classes because of travel, and I am not sure if she will choose to do doctoral work.

The class consisted of six African Americans, and three or four whites (depending on how you classify one student or how he classifies himself), and eight women and two men; all together, ten wo/men. It was taught by a white woman, at a university where my department is seven-eighths white and the university, as a whole, has only a tiny percentage of African-American faculty. Racial tension was in the air between two of the women, in conversation before class and in direct confrontations, but it did not boil over into animosity. Rather, the two of them wound up appreciating each other's insights.

The Structure of the Class

I used *Wisdom Ways* as the first reading in the course, dedicating two weeks to it, and then returning to it at midterm. In between, we viewed together the National Film Board of Canada's video *Half the Kingdom*, which was made in 1989 and introduces a spectrum of Jewish feminists, from orthodox (Norma Bammel Joseph) to conservative (Rabbi Elyse Goldstein) to secular (Michele Landsberg) to atheist (Naomi Goldenberg). I have viewed this video dozens of times and see more in it each time. This time I was struck by the amount of attention given to orthodoxy in Canada, the US, and Israel, as though that is where the most interesting or significant battle is and will be. The scene of feminists being shouted down when they brought the Torah to the Western Wall in Jerusalem in order to pray is one that no one forgets.

Other readings for the class included selections from the *Women's Bible Commentary*, *Searching the Scriptures*, Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism*, two books by Ostriker, *Feminist Revision of the Bible*, and *The Nakedness of the Fathers*, and my own recent work, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene* (2002). Bibliographies in *Wisdom Ways*, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, and *Searching the Scriptures* supplied research leads. Students were encouraged to do this extra reading and several did.

As a part of the class, the students helped with and hosted an event co-sponsored by the Religious Studies Master's program, our Women's Studies-Program, and the YMCA Writers Voice of Metropolitan Detroit: the presentation of a cantata, 'Jephthah's Daughter', with poetic-text by Alicia Ostriker of Rutgers (forthcoming) and music composed by Moshe Budmor of Princeton. Both Ostriker and Budmor came to Detroit for the performance. We studied that text in advance, along with Phyllis Trible's treatment of the story in *Texts of Terror*, and the students had an opportunity to meet and discuss the work

with Ostriker and Budmor. It has been my practice, every time I have taught 'Feminist Interpretation' over the last 15 or 20 years, to incorporate into the class an outside event, for the whole community. I do this also for my 'Women's Studies Introduction'. The concept that I am trying to demonstrate, of course, is that feminist and liberationist work escapes the classroom: that is the essence of it. In this case, students helped with publicity, driving, receptions, setup of rooms, photography. It was an exhausting experience, made possible by the gift of an anonymous donor and our own shoestring.

Students were also encouraged to attend a conference at Harvard on 'Religion and the Feminist Movement', 1–3 November 2002, and to attend the meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature in Toronto later that month. Several were very interested, but no one was able to do this financially. It had been my hope here that the meetings and the networking that takes place at these meetings would introduce our students to a broader world and energize their work. On occasion, there has been scholarship money available to make this possible.

The assignments for the course were simple: a quiz on *Wisdom Ways*, a final exam, and a paper that was to be their own feminist interpretation and/or *midrash* on any biblical or apocryphal text. Procedures were discussed in class. One student who thinks of herself as uncreative worried constantly about 'how creative' I was going to insist they be in the paper.

Responses to Wisdom Ways

Our early discussions of *Wisdom Ways* centered on two things. The first was how difficult the book was, with its use of 'technical language'. One of the students with no background at all in this discipline quickly got hooked and put a lot of energy into her reading. She surprised the group by saying that the book was really very easy to understand, and demonstrated her grasp by relating her insights about 'dark Americans', which exemplified 'the hermeneutical advantage of the poor'. Another, the one with the most background and the most resistance to the content, kept insisting she needed more background information and more resources in order to understand. She resisted what she called 'jargon', and early on lost energy. I am fascinated by the fact that in this class those with more conventional educational opportunities consistently found this book more difficult than those who had had fewer such opportunities. This is not always the case, in

my experience: sometimes the clash of fundamentalisms, class, and racial issues produce a much more complex picture.

One chapter in particular proved to be a particular roadblock. The use of the 'F' word and terms like 'malestream' and 'wo/man' put some people off. Exploring the reason for the turn-off, one student linked it with fear of the unknown, fear of a 'female-centered agenda', and fear of women in general. Students came to realize that the questions in each chapter were 'to chew on for a long time', and that one's responses to them would change over time. This study was 'just a beginning'. On second reading, some students said they wished this had been the only book for the course, remarking that they could have chewed on it for three, four, or five months. Perhaps next time this is what I will do.

The second thing our early discussions of *Wisdom Ways* centered on was the question of how and why interpretation is/must be political. The question of the political nature of interpretation ran into resistance from those whose traditions (and their own inclinations) had led them in the direction of individualistic spirituality. It was a push to analyze the political dimensions and implications of this spirituality. Related to this was the feeling that some of the questions and exercises in *Wisdom Ways* were 'personal thought questions', the responses to which some did not want to bring to the group; they were about 'a personal process' rather than something for discussion with others. I will come back to this point. Use and re-use of Norman Gottwald's 'Self Inventory' helped one student make some connections.

There was disagreement over whether it was easier for feminism to get a hearing politically or religiously, whether it was easier to fight the Bible or fight the US government. In both cases, people who fought for change were said to be regarded by others as having something wrong with them. Situations were brought up in which the overlap of religion and politics was powerful and frightening, for example in court: 'Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?' One woman said 'dark Americans have more reason to be afraid of the US government' than of the Bible, but for her the Bible also was becoming frightening: 'Whereas I went before to the Bible for comfort', she said, 'now I see it's a horror story. If this horror has been going on this long, when is it going to stop?' Another shared response was that from the beginning, the book reached beyond the class: it was discussed with neighbors, church study groups, friends, a sister in Saudi Arabia (who wore the full abaya because of her blue eyes). The question of how and if

Wisdom Ways could be used with groups was brought up constantly. In terms of use in church contexts, the Baptist woman who attended Bible study weekly said that she would give the book to 'the agitators' (among whom she now saw herself). The Lutheran student said he knew there would be 'not enough interest in feminism' in his Sunday adult Bible study group to use the book; what they were interested in was 'the tenets of the Christian faith'. I wondered if he would become an agitator.

Wisdom Ways worked well with other course materials, especially the cantata on Jephthah's Daughter. We explored Judges 11 in terms of the obedient daughter and also, in the words of one student, 'where in the world a disobedient daughter could [or can] go'. This provided an opening for recognizing that that part of the world, that place of protest and resistance, does exist and millions live in it. The performance of the cantata was criticized by one student, and by the composer himself, as lacking the anger that Ostriker and Budmor intended as movement beyond the Bible. It was difficult in my living room, as it would be in a classroom or at the Society of Biblical Literature, to express that anger. The student who most resisted feminist interpretation (and who has had the most extensive exposure to it) wrote,

> I often find the Bible comforting, often challenging, sometimes puzzling. Anger has not been a usual response for me. I have had only a little exposure to the places in the Bible that would be mostly likely to cause anger or I have without recognizing, maybe, the troubling nature of the selection. When I do have a sense that something is very wrong, my immediate response is more one of sadness than anger—for better or for worse, this is what my personality is.

She was unable to make connections between her 'personality' and relationships and the church and Bible. 'I am certain that how Scripture is interpreted has a connection to "structures of alienation and domination" today, but the connection is still nebulous to me… I simply cannot recall moments where I have felt left out of a text.' She is, she said, afraid of 'denigrating men', being categorized as having views she does not have (she did not believe there are varieties of feminism), and unwilling to 'throw out the whole Bible and church'. Besides, 'If I were being oppressed and didn't know it, I would not want to be made aware of it. Not if I were happily going on, living my life.' On the positive side, she expressed the view that for some, maybe many, is at the heart of feminist scholarship: that she is no different 'in God's eyes' because of her gender, that she is included. She was the

student I most worried about, and so for a class exercise we focused on the varieties of anger produced by Luke 10, which I will describe below.

The greatest contrast to the position just described came from a woman with no Religious Studies background who wrote, 'An electric shock could not have evoked a more profound impact than the one obtained from reading the introduction of this book. Learning to understand the Bible from a feminist perspective is a seriously emotional and life-changing endeavor.' She had feelings of unimaginable sadness and horror. She caught on right away that the 'ways women understand the Bible affects our meaning-making and the way we understand ourselves and the world in which we live'. She took up the image of the dance, wanting to break out 'of the rhythm of rigidity of culturally ascribed dance steps'. She identified as a major obstacle for her the lack of willingness among fellow Christians to explore critically or entertain the idea that the Bible adversely affects the lives of women in present day society.

Where these two students agreed was on the importance the Bible had for them. The second student said, 'The Bible is a place I have gone since my later teen years for solace and peace of mind where I could not go anywhere to anyone else'. They also agreed on the possibility that such critical study might lead to no longer accepting the Bible as words from God, to the need for letting go of this idea. The class explored both the letting go, and the refusal to let go.

The Personal and the Political

One student comment that I thought was right on target was that a 'Women's Studies' introductory course would have been a good preparation and even requirement for this class, and for reading this book. In 'Women's Studies Introduction', because the issues are so 'personal', journaling gives the quiet students who are processing difficult memories and realities a chance to do this in private, and expose what they want to—if they want to—later on, sometimes with prodding. Next time I use *Wisdom Ways*, I think I will identify some questions for such early journaling.

Let me give two examples of this aspect of the 'personal'. The first is from a student who did not want this used in class but who gave me permission to use it here. She was working with Chapter 4, Question 2: 'Utilizing the radical democratic as well as the kyriarchical diagrams,

seek to envision political, economic, familial, educational, social, legal, theological, religious, or cultural democratic structures. Share any experience of such structures which you might have had. What makes it difficult to envision such structures?' It was the last part of the question that she responded to.

> I come from a family of eleven children… Growing up in such a brood was like living in a small village with a King and Queen or Sub-King. Both hated women and found females inferior; that we girls were born after all of the boys made their form of fairness less sexist, in their eyes. It was not that we were girls that prevented us from privilege, hell, even from fair treatment, in the household; it was they would say, because we were the youngest. That thin veil of logic only wore out over time, the females did all of the housework; we were used as foot stools (hands under our chins, elbows on the ground with our knees curled up under our bellies) for our older brothers while they watched TV. We ran errands to stores, got drinks, ate last, never sat in the front seat of family vehicles, were not allowed to call things 'mine'. On those rare occasions that one of the girls would ask why things were as they were, the rote answer was 'because yer thuh yungst' or 't'aint nun uh yer goddamn biznus WHY!' However, this unfair treatment was also tempered with demeaning remarks about women or females, niggers, jews, wops, spics, and chinks. Our family dog knew a trick—the play dead trick—all one had to ask her was this, 'Laddy, would you rather be a nigger or a dead dog?' With that prompting, Laddy rolled over and played dead. Here is the structure of our household:
>
> King
> Related adult males outside of our household
> SubKing
> sons
> male friends of sons
> related adult females outside of our household
> daughters
> pets
> clergy
> female friends of sons
> male law enforcement
> female law enforcement
> female menial laborers
> male menial laborers
> male within the civilized world's power structure (politicians, management types)
> stray animals
> blacks
> mexicans
> italians
> jews
> asians.

This is hard stuff for a class, or even the Jerry Springer show, to deal with. It is good to have it out there. This student also wrote that she had had no experience with radical democratic structures; no community with a multiplicity of voices in which everyone takes part. She found herself 'pathetically grateful' for any inclusion.

From Chapter 2, another student responded to a question on 'moving steps' that asked what effects a religious text had. She wrote a description of an argument she overheard (at age 8) between her paternal grandmother and her oldest daughter about the paternal grandfather's incest and pedophilia, which had resulted in pregnancies. When confronted, the grandmother quoted the Bible: 'something about a wife obeying her husband and honor thy father'. The student then also remembered being molested by this man while she slept.

One male articulated his fears:

> having a foot in a privileged category… Not only do I have to critique patriarchal ideologies and interpretations while maintaining a political drive, and stay in connection with wo/men's liberation movements, [but] I also have to critique my own interpretations and have others do the same. Try as I might, my views cannot be completely trusted, by myself or by anyone else.

He is attempting to be in solidarity with those groups that he is not explicitly a part of, and with those movements that he is. 'It's difficult to dance the dance of Wisdom in a male padded suit', he said. 'I fear the lack of order' in a non-hierarchical order. He also wondered if Wisdom would want to lead in the dance—and hoped she would, since he's 'terribly uncoordinated'.

The other male said the questions and exercises did not help him locate himself within the kyriarchal structures of domination and oppression that he now begins to realize he lives and participates in. He could not articulate why they did not. He did, however, note that his church (the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) is becoming more hierarchical due to its liaisons with the Episcopal Church, especially in terms of election of leaders (his tradition) versus the appointment of leaders.

The exercises and discussion produced different insights with respect to activism. One is the awareness that once you realize the extent of domination and begin to act against it, you can't turn back. This awareness spreads: 'My daughter is seeing it now. It's an "us" thing.' For a few students, participation in the Women in Black protests became a part of the class. You can do enough and hold back nothing,

so that you have 'no avenue out', no going home. In contrast is the realization that consciousness can still become dulled and that (especially) as a male feminist you can betray this movement. Why? Because you have become 'addicted to power and privilege, to that padded suit'.

Reflecting on structures, a Baptist student realized there was no real alternating leadership in her church, and that the role of money (who gave the most) was greater than she had thought. A Catholic student argued that the official pyramidal structure of her church had no impact on her local church, with which she was very satisfied. At the same time, she admitted that she was too pessimistic even to encourage her daughter's interest in greater participation.

Engaging Wisdom Ways

An exercise that I found particularly fruitful is located in Chapter 5 ('moving steps'). It is an exercise in historical imagination. Martha (of the Martha and Mary story in Lk. 10) was chosen to be 'heard into speech' by having her write a letter or give a speech. Here is one letter (the reader of this article may be able to guess which student wrote it):

> Dear Jesus: I didn't have time to talk to you privately yesterday, so I decided to write you this note to get something off my chest. You know how much we love having you come to our house for dinner. It seems we don't get to see you very often anymore, and we still have so much to learn from you. And we just enjoy your company! But something you said last night hurt me, and I felt the need to let you know. If we weren't such good friends I probably wouldn't even bother. But here goes:
>
> When I was trying to get things together and get dinner on the table, Mary wasn't so much as lifting a finger. I complained about that and you didn't support me at all!
>
> You said that Mary had chosen the 'better part' by sitting at your feet and listening to you while I got everything ready. Well, certainly she had! But if I had done the same, who would have prepared the meal? What would we have eaten? Who would have cleaned? It's like all the things that women do you simply take for granted: food just appears on the table—don't worry about it! I really, really wish that you would have encouraged Mary to help me. She would do anything you told her to do! Everything would have been ready more quickly, and then we both could have taken time to listen to you, which seems more fair to me.
>
> I look forward to your next visit, and hope that we will have a moment to talk then. Love, Martha.

This letter caused a flurry of loud and angry comments to fly:

Against Martha: 'This letter is passive aggressive'. 'I'd have more respect for Martha if she could just park herself and say screw it'. 'Martha the martyr'.

Also about Mary: 'I like her better because she's breaking the rules about what women are supposed to do, and she doesn't care'. 'She's the pretty one!' 'Probably lazy!'

And against Jesus: 'He wants all Mary's attention and a meal too'. 'Why can't he get up off his ass and help?' 'Jesus is in a padded man's suit'.

This created a moment in which to ask about the rhetoric of the text: what was being promoted, urged? (That Mary's choice was 'better' than Martha's; that Martha shut up; that the reader should choose what Mary chose; that the authority of Jesus was seen to back this division, this hostility between women.) It also created a moment in which to discuss the meanings of the word *diakonia* and the passages regarding Jesus himself serving and urging others to serve, along with the ideal of serving; to think about meals in house churches in connection with the eucharist; to consider how the Gospels function on several levels (the historical, the early communities, the evangelists) and how they can be read in the light of women's participation and *diakonia* in the early decades of the church (in the light of evidence in Paul's letters, for example) and the suppressing of women's leadership (read in the light of Luke's overall design in Luke–Acts). The sibling rivalry/murder theme, from Cain and Abel forward, was also explored.

This exercise produced the best 'Aha' reaction, with much laughter. The ethics and history of interpretation took on new meaning in light of all the work they had done on structural injustice. Emails exchanged with me and each other became more intense and, from my viewpoint, more successful. The exercise had worked sort of like a parable: the text had pulled them in. Those who spoke out and took sides at the start saw themselves as indicted, tricked, embarrassed, enlightened.

There were several more re-writes of Luke 10 that moved us into a discussion of Christology. One of the re-writes focused on the sisters and gave them a dialogue about their relation to one another, and about their understandings of Jesus:

> 'Martha, do you think *I'm* lazy and took advantage of your good graces?' 'I don't know what you were doing', Martha sighed. 'We had an opportunity here to show this man what we are doing and what we have accomplished and you chose to be a lap dog at his feet'. Mary responded, 'I know you believe those in our group and that one, the Christ, say that we can learn and teach and prophesy. I saw you tonight when he came to your house

> and you let him in; you welcomed him in, but you did not proceed to yield the floor. *In a flash I saw his eyes narrow*. That is when I sat with the rest of the room. In my rapt attention to his teaching I was silently screaming for you to sit too and to listen. It is not solely that we are women; it is that we are not he. He speaks of being humble and he lets our other sisters talk to him while he listens, he lets our sex into the conversations of his peers. *But he does not yield the floor. He will not have his thunder stolen*.' Martha answered, 'Mary you are wrong, he has told his followers in the past to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Tonight we had a chance to show this, in this house which has become a church. And it was at that moment that you fell into the role of mute woman…my heart is broken not by his words as much as by your actions.'

In this re-visioning, Mary insists women have the responsibility 'to keep our tongues quiet with the rest of the flock' when the occasion requires it. 'Our silence is never going to be permanent but it is going to be required now and again to keep our place in this new world we are building'—with Jesus as the leader. Martha sees this as 'half of something or all of nothing', and agrees to the former, for now. The author explained that she sees Martha and Mary not failing one another, but 'the situation' failing them and pitting them against each other. There was lively discussion about how long the 'for now' has been, and about strategies of dissent.

Another re-visioning had Martha responding to Jesus' put down of her distraction:

> What do you mean? When you sent our disciples to preach you didn't worry they would be distracted. When you had them distributing bread and fish to a big crowd you didn't say they were distracted… By the way, later on Mary and I will give you some feedback on your sermon on the mount. We have some ideas on how you can make it even more effective.

In another one, Martha fumed, 'Jesus, give me a break. You're so important that we're all supposed to drop everything and listen to you? You're letting this "messiah" stuff go to your head! Mary, get over here and give me a hand.'

And another: 'Martha said nothing and maintained a calm demeanor. But as it happened, preparations for dinner took an exceedingly long time… Martha figured no one cared about the meal very much, so she need not hurry it along in any way. She sat in the kitchen and read some magazine article about the predicted end of the world, and continued preparations when she felt inspired. She "forgot" about the appetizers and they sat in the kitchen as well. The meal was late that evening, eaten by a group of people who were famished and more than a little annoyed—at Martha.' Discussion here centered on

the strategy and (sometimes) ineffectiveness of passive resistance, and then moved onto the issue of wo/men's responsibilities with regard to world hunger (facts and figures supplied).

Changed by Wisdom Ways

The students addressed the question of how reading and debating *Wisdom Ways* has changed them. One said not much; she often takes a long time to think about things. But she acknowledged she has been forced by the discussion to examine her own views more deeply and has learned that the spectrum of feminist views is actually wide and varied. She's learned to 'look for silenced voices, and though it's not easy at all, to imagine what those voices might have said'. She listed words that could characterize and image her transformation: gradual, thought-provoking, evolution, enlighten, continued/beginning, and sobering. Another saw herself as tremendously changed: 'sitting in a group of people from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and ages, with open-minded and serious leadership… I learned to look at the subtext and hear what was not being said, by looking at what was being shouted in the Bible.' Another:

> I learned that not only do I find a lot of the Bible absurd, I am able to laugh about it and I have a desire to change things. I want not only to read feminist revisions of the Bible, I have a few I would like to write. I discovered that my sense of humor about the Bible far outweighs my disgust and anger… By allowing me to be unscholarly and a bit childish, *Wisdom Ways* also allowed me to take my feelings and ideas seriously and to become interested in the scholarship. It is difficult for me to explain such a personal and profound transformation.

The metaphor she used for this is liquid:

> I am like a liquid that is able to get underneath and in between the words of the Bible and as a result I can read the subtext clearly. Water is an amazing thing; it seems incredibly harmless but it can carve mountains. Over time a small stream can create a canyon. I am like water and I have begun *as* a trickle; but by the time I am through, *if* I am ever through, I will have carved stone and become the deluge that could fell houses.

Two students worked on celebrating Wisdom. One wrote a liturgy or litany (parts for the congregation, chorus, readers, and Wisdom herself) that he hopes will be performed in his Lutheran church, ending with Wisdom's meal. 'It will be controversial', he said, 'but so what?' He primarily used canonical texts, which were previously unfamiliar to him and which he saw as 'a great reward' for searching. He also found

them a tremendous source of creativity: he presented the justice, judgment and equity in the Bible as a whole as the work of wisdom. We hoped that maybe Moshe Budmor (the composer of 'Jephthah's Daughter') might be interested in setting this liturgy to music.

Another student pondered Wisdom during a fourteen-hour bus ride to Georgia:

> The bus comes jerking to a stop. Strafing my vision across the seats ahead of me, I see women and men who joined up with us from the Catholic Worker House, six Jesuit novices from the Detroit province, my classmates, and two Mercy sisters. Placing *Wisdom Ways* back in my bag, I realize I'm not going to get around to rereading the last chapter before I get back to school. *Ekklesia*, have I ever seen one and how would I know if I have? Am I standing in one right now? Have all these people heard the calling of Sophia as I have? Have they all been called in restlessness in the night, and been called by names by someone that they did not know the answer? All these people from so many places brought together for one single goal: the closing of the School of the Americas, a training ground for those who seek power and domination, not defense, love or hope. Latin American men working for Latin American men in power, being sent to a US military installation to be trained on how to keep those in power in power. Who better than the United States to teach that lesson…

After listening to four hours of speakers, he asks himself,

> Where was Sophia present in what I heard? That question is easy, in the two guest speakers from Colombia. Not much older than I am the two of them had lost most of their family to warfare fueled and backed by US guns and money. It was in their stories that I heard the voice of Sophia. I heard the voice of those in need, the voice of those silenced and new to me. Their pain had become my pain through their voice; their pain had become my pain through *her* voice. Her pain had become my pain through her voice.

The final papers for this class included one that imagined meeting Mary of Magdala on the road: questioning her about the movement, about the empty tomb, her understanding of resurrection. It also described seeing her speak out in (our) public places: with the Women in Black, about to be executed on a soccer field in Afghanistan, crying out because her husband just sacrificed her daughter over a stupid oath made in battle. There was also a paper, 'Rizpah and Wo/man's Justice', on the story about Rizpah mourning the death and impalement of the sons of Saul, two of them her own: she 'took sackcloth and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night' (2 Sam. 21.1-14).

Five months of mourning were seen as the demand for justice from the king and from the Lord. 'But not the king's justice, or the justice of the Gibeonites, or even the justice of the Lord. That justice only creates more victims. It is no justice at all. No', Rizpah continued, 'I want woman justice…simple human decency.' Like much of the work done in this class, these papers take on new resonances since the US invasion of Iraq.

What was my own experience? I learned to trust the students more, to be less worried about how to deal with their diversities, and to step back more—but, paradoxically, to get more involved in the process and the laughter. The scholarship produced here in the end was not to my mind less rigorous than that produced by conventional historical-critical methods; in fact those methods were invigorated, in different ways for those with some background and for those with little, or none. Methods and terms were explained and discussed as they came up, as they were needed. There was sharp awareness of our different traditions, different politics, and of different understandings of feminism. Yet by the end of the course, we had, so to speak, moved the coffee table and even those uncoordinated among us were dancing or stomping around. As one person said, 'We know that the piper must be paid, but we're willing to pay. And the price is less than we have been paying all along.' I did not see this process as simply reading into the texts whatever politics one already has, but rather as helping us articulate and develop our politics—an important distinction.

Birdman

I
He comes to the corner of Ash and 14th
every morning around 7:30
with wonder bags of bread.

There on the corner
by the torn chainlink fence
across from the burntout staggering houses

there in the litter
he tosses crusts and hunks;
and the pigeons who know him
and the sparrows who expect him

come tamp down the dirt and the gritty snow
etching footprints in a big circle
on the curb, gutter, sidewalk, curb

leaving a Navaho dance painting
round the center
where the Birdman stands,
ever faithful.

II
As a child I found it awesome
that the number of dead birds you do see
is not what you'd expect,
given the millions of live ones.
So where do they go to die?
do they die?

I was told:
See how frail their bodies are,
their little bones;
they disappear quickly,
ground down, plucked dry, blown away,
millions.

But it is written:
consider the birds of the air.

Well, what sort of God would know they fall?
what sort of God remembers birds
by the millions?

Not you, King of the Universe,
melek ha-'olam,
not you, but the Birdman

feeding the fragile selves,
coming when expected,
crazy with cold and caring.

He's not someone you would want to know, or be.

III
So, King of the Universe,
save me from the Birdman

and from the woman who takes in all cats and kittens
till the house reeks of urine and Seafood Platter
and the neighbors complain
and the city shows up to shut her down.

Save me from the woman in Detroit
who buries battered children, one by one,
beginning with the one
who was three
found tied to the chair in her feces in a closet
and the one
whose mother starved her for whining
and the one
put in the washing machine
and the ones
in dumpsters.
And all her money is gone, she borrows for the caskets, the
flowers, the plots, the music.
She charges and charges on her Mastercard.
She weeps, sometimes the only mourner,
shown in the Free Press, clearly crazy, out of control.

King of the Universe
save me from the Birdman.

Find me another route to work.

Part II

Feminist Translations of the New Testament

House Hunting with Delores

Wearing her designer frames over a bloodshot, half-closed eye, she asked me to take her to the bank first, and then out to 6 Mile to see a couple of listings. National Bank of Detroit in the Buhl Building was a polished, quiet shrine. We strode over the bankers behind desks and one greeted her. 'Mrs Gentry? We finally got the money'. A long explanation about how the check sat in the post office or somewhere, with no one knowing who Delores Gentry was, since she had no account. Finally the one who dealt with Delores's tears and cries and accusations remembered to call, and the check came through.

What Delores wanted was $490 of the $1000, and she got it in a check made out to herself. Which, he told her, no one will cash except this particular branch, since she has no identification which is acceptable. What she did have, and produced, was a birth certificate and a marriage license. They were yellowed, folded into tiny squares, scotch taped, and unfolded and smoothed to look like ancient documents of some sect in the Judean desert. She had no driver's license, passport, credit cards, Michigan Identification card. To get these, she would need what she didn't have, would need many things she did not have. $510 was placed in a savings account, and this way at least there was a little interest. We left and jaywalked, Delores stopping traffic nicely with a pointed finger.

Then on to King Realty on McNichols. On the way, Delores said why she had her hair done: it is a symbol of self-respect and a punishment for Bruce who wanted her to forget it. It is a sign she can survive beating and come up beautiful. List of houses in hand, we turned onto Kendall, the first street. Rows of beautiful homes, clipped front yards, children playing peacefully on tricycles, shrubbery. Nothing boarded up or abandoned, nothing burnt. Our spirits soared. The address was 1300, and we were at 1500. Four blocks per hundred. On the cross streets were nice stores, bus lines. But gradually, not imperceptibly, the neighborhood declined with the numbers. Brown boards appeared on a window or two. We tried not to notice. We couldn't *not* notice.

The house was at a corner next to a vacant lot, a box with one broken window above and two beside the sagging door. It is so shaded by bushes and trees and the overgrowth from the lot that it was dark in the hot sun,

sinister, a temptation to break in from the lot. 'Welcome' was painted on the broken step. A woman answered our knock but said we cannot come in now. She will move 'in a week or so'. She told us the neighborhood is awful; she is moving because her ten year old has no one his age to play with, and those who play with him hit him with a bat. The second house was nearby, better in that it was brick, but uninhabited. The third house was another white box, one of its numbers slipping.

A week later Demarco was at the door as soon as I came home. 'My mother said come quick. She wants to tell you something.' Is it an emergency? 'Well, yeah. We got a house.' Delores was wearing her white sundress, and urged me into the dining/living room which had been somewhat cleaned up. A stereo stood in three parts on the bar, the red oilcloth on the table was less sticky, the underpants off the floor, not a roach on the walls. 'Jane, I got a house. It's on Anastesia, near Schoolcraft. It is GORgeous. GorGEous. Two bedrooms, one master bedroom, a basement, carpets so thick your feets sink down. Demarco liked it so much he was trembling. He said, "Mama, are we gonna lose it, or are we gonna stay here?" I say this is gonna be your home.'

After many different houses and apartments, Delores wound up in Sinai Hospital on Outer Drive. She asked to see me. Her stomach was swollen and there was some pain. She had been told she could have visitors any time at all. 'I expect that means I'm dying'. She laughed and talked about men, about Bruce, Demarco, her daughters, about how she knew she done wrong, would live different if she could. A tall man came in to mop the floor; she asked him where he was going to eat Thanksgiving with his family. He said he had no family. 'Oooo, Jane', she winked and leered 'how about him? He cute.' I kissed her goodbye for the last time. Demarco phoned to tell me that she had died at home, falling off the bed, calling out to the man she was living with, 'I'm dying'. Some of us from 17th Street contributed to pay for the $600 burial. The funeral home was next door to the Cashmere Club Lounge, and I thought how much she would rather be there, drinking and partying.

Looking for Beruriah's Tomb

> Whether women in rabbinic communities actually studied Torah remains uncertain… The Babylonian Talmud does mention one learned woman. Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, who is said to have learned three hundred halakot from three hundred scholars in a single day (b. *Pesaḥ* 62b)… In recent years, scholars have been divided about the proper interpretation of the Beruriah traditions. Some argue that Beruriah demonstrates at least a few women in rabbinic communities could study Torah and issue authoritative rulings; others…suggest that Beruriah is a fiction designed to show the absurdity of such a woman.[1]

In the effort to lay a little stone
on Beruriah's tomb
(as on Rambam's,
Yohanan ben Zakkai's,
and Akiva's),

I ask the local guide in Tiberias.
'You can believe I will not look for it;
I am not interested in her'.
I ask the guy selling prayerbooks and stubby candles
outside her husband's tomb.
'It is an unknown place'.
I ask the rabbi inside
who rises angry and alarmed from his desk.
'It is not here'.

I drink arak, eat almonds and candy from a tray,
watch birds swoop through the grand marble hall of Meir's tomb
and ask the women praying there for a husband, for a son.
'No one knows'.

'Why not', my student chides,
'why not pray for directions?'

O God of Meir,
answer me.

1. Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 98.

God of Meir,
who Rashi says got one of his students to seduce her
after she mocked the sages' dictum: women are unstable.

God of Meir,
who Rashi says abandoned her
and fled to Babylonia after her 'adultery' and suicide.
God of Meir,
who did not protect her
answer me.

You owe us.

God of Beruriah,
who taught Meir to pray
to pray that sinners repent, not die.

God of Beruriah,
who taught Meir to be comforted
when their two sons died.

God of Beruriah,
who ridiculed a Sadducee
mocked a lazy student
made a fool of Rabbi Yose the Galilean.

God of Beruriah,
who quoted no teacher, and no teacher claimed
whom no student quoted, and no student claimed,

God of Beruriah,
who 'strangled herself', says Rashi.

God of Beruriah

You show me where to lay a little stone.

4

(Re)Presentations of Woman in the Christian Testament Gospels and Acts

> And just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreading, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*.[1]

Introduction

A literary representation is neither a window nor a mirror. It is not a window because it does not innocently, neutrally, or without comment give a view of lived reality, things as they are or as they were. A literary representation is the result of a series of choices and selections, based on a vision that is both thematic and constructed. A literary representation is not a mirror because it does not simply reflect the reader's face. Yet like a window, a literary representation has a frame, providing a limited view, which is finally somebody's chosen view. And like a mirror, it can be held, tipped, angled, to urge readers to see themselves in it, and to model themselves on what they see. Women's consciousness has for centuries been shaped by the powerful, simplified images of biblical women. Every reader, moreover, reads herself into or out of the reading: she is resistant or compliant, imagining, filling in the gaps, subverting, (re)designing character. The reader and the text co-create the representations.

Literary representations are more real than the reality they are thought to represent. They are described functioning in contexts that are social, political, cultural, and economic, having to do with class, race, and gender. Representations of women that omit reference to the realities of female experience, activities, and viewpoints both shape and perpetuate patriarchal ideals. Representations of women that

1. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale, 1979), p. 49.

inspire or allow women's self-expression and freedom both shape and perpetuate feminist ideals.

The Texts

This essay focuses on the representations of women in the four canonical Gospels and Acts. These works are layered. They have been created (looking at the process in reverse) by writers and editors, out of oral and written sources, community traditions, and historical memories. All but one of these writings has a literary relation to the others: the Gospel of John has contacts with the Synoptic tradition, probably in the oral state, but no apparent literary connection. Comparing accounts, the reader can watch the representations change, as shifts in historical memories occur and rhetorical agendas emerge.

The Gospels and Acts are historical fiction, or fictional history. The women represented are most likely the literary creations of first-century men who did the remembering, the handing down of tradition and the writing (though memories and traditions preserved by women may have been incorporated into the writings, and female authorship of the Gospels of Mark and John can be regarded as a possibility). This means they are androcentric representations of women, male constructs: the women are not fully in focus, not central characters, but peripheral to the story of male characters. They are the blurred and often indecipherable background: they are women as men think or wish them to be. They are also created by readers down through the twenty centuries of Christian history, to me reading now and you reading me reading them.

Women are represented in these texts in a variety of literary forms and contexts. They are individual characters in the stories; mentioned as members of groups; the subject of sayings of Jesus (legal sayings such as those concerning divorce or adultery, parables such as the sweeping woman, metaphors and symbols, such as the use of 'birthpangs' for the pain preceding the coming of God's kingdom). Women also appear in a variety of roles and activities. They travel, study, grind meal, bake bread, do domestic work. They are healed or request healing for children; they are exorcized or request exorcism for a child. They are mothers, wives, widows, sisters, servants, friends, prostitutes, maids, sinners, bridesmaids. They are represented with a variety of traits; one of the most significant is persistence. How women are represented in each text is related to how Jesus and the male disciples are represented. Even though women are not represented as idealized objects of desire

or threatening sexual forces to be tamed, still the dominant representation of male discipleship is delineated over against women's secondary status and their silence within the texts.

While there is disagreement among scholars about how much or how little history is accessible in these narratives, and disagreement about appropriate methods, interpretive frameworks, and the value of the historical project itself, no scholars today regard the texts as pure fiction, or all the characters as pure literary creations. Historical questions are appropriate and inevitable, and deeply influenced by ecclesiastical and scholarly uses of the texts. Analysis of the Gospels and Acts as literature, and of readers' contribution to meaning, take place in the context of historical concern, and vice versa.

Each work is anonymous; the names attached to them are traditional. We know nothing solid about the authors except what can be inferred from what they wrote. The Evangelists are clearly writing for distinctive early Christian audiences: to meet audience needs, to respond to audience questions or conflicts, to attempt to shape the audience and especially to (re)represent Jesus for their own times and places. The relation of the Christian movement to the Roman government and the broader culture or cultures is treated differently in the different texts. The representation of women in a given work may give clues about social and leadership roles in the community in which and for which the work was written.

Some of the women represented in the Gospels and Acts are Jewish, and some are Gentile. As our historical knowledge about Jewish and Gentile women of the Greco-Roman period grows and changes, so must our readings of the Christian Testament's representations of women. It is important to recognize, also, that within Jewish and Gentile contexts there are many different roles for women and many different perspectives held by women. We need to resist the temptation to over-generalize or over-simplify.

A Feminist Interpretation

Seven principles and insights of feminist interpretation are basic to an examination of the representation of women, as I see it:

1. The Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures of the first century were patriarchal and kyriarchal, as our cultures are, although there were and are enormous differences in the ways these ideologies are structured and shape society. Feminist criticism presents a challenge to patriar-

chal/kyriarchal assumptions and taken-for-granted notions of how the world operated and operates, and how things had been and have to be.

2. Androcentric language makes women linguistically invisible and reinforces the belief that males are the universal, central, important category. For the sake of historical verisimilitude, then, if nothing else, women should be read into this language, making it inclusive. That is, where women are not mentioned explicitly, they should nevertheless be *imagined* as present: in 'crowds', among 'disciples' of Jesus, 'sinners', 'the people', 'the Jews', 'the Gentiles', 'this evil generation', 'brothers', 'slaves', 'seventy (two) others' sent out two by two, and 'they' who were in the synagogue, or 'they' who were already there when Jesus comes with the twelve for the last supper, 'the sons of Israel', 'the saints', 'prisoners', and perhaps even 'the local leaders of the Jews'. This assumption of women's presence and agency throws into high relief the distortion in representations of women as marginal and passive or absent.

3. Feminist interpretation operates with the suspicion that the representation of women is not only stereotypical and partial, but even at times distorted on purpose or erased. It is suspected that, historically speaking, a trajectory can be drawn from women's active participation in the Jesus movement and other Jewish groups toward suppression of women's involvement and leadership. By the time the Gospels and Acts were written, women's roles were already being minimized. It is important to compare representations in the canonical Gospels with those in non-canonical material, in some of which women are more active, vocal, thoughtful, and with rabbinic and patristic treatments of women from the second to the seventh centuries that document and institutionalize backlash.

4. The Jesus movement was a renewal movement within Judaism, resisting Roman rule, comparable in some ways to John the Baptist's movement and that of the people of Qumran. Those Jewish women who followed Jesus should be seen as choosing an option not over against but within Judaism, and not the only one that empowered women. Women in the Judaisms of this period were 'not only powerless, but also leaders, not only legally disadvantaged but also in enjoyment of certain rights'.[2] Feminist critics are particularly aware of

2. Bernadette J. Brooten, 'Jewish Women's History in the Roman Period: A Task for Christian Theology', *HTR* 79 (1986), pp. 22-30 (25).

and work to eradicate the anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism that pervades much New Testament criticism in the popular and scholarly portrait of Jesus as feminist over against a sexist, misogynist (and historically misunderstood, misrepresented) Judaism of the first century CE. Jesus the feminist hero come to liberate women from Judaism is regarded both as a misrepresentation of the Evangelists' representations of him and as a historically flawed reconstruction.

5. Feminist readers aware of the New Testament's cultural and/or religious power can and must intervene in the regimes of representation that are oppressive, and both subvert and transform that representation. Focalizing differently than the author or narrator who is perceived to be unreliable involves highlighting background figures, supplying character and motive, and challenging values. The reader is free to move when necessary in directions other than those pointed to by the texts' rhetorical strategies: to resist, to leap over, to swerve.

6. The word 'woman' is increasingly seen as unstable: what appears to be a monolithic, homogenous social group is and was in reality a spectrum of female diversity: in terms of economic and social class, sexual orientation, culture, what we call race, and psycho/social/ spiritual experiences. 'Woman' is a changing cultural creation, serving kyriarchal interests when used in the processes of idealizing or scapegoating. In this sense 'woman' is constructed of gender stereotypes of femininity. But once gender categories are deconstructed, it is no longer possible to think of women in generalities. For lack of a better term, however, the term 'woman' will be used here both to refer to representations of female persons in the texts (which often do conform to gender stereotypes), and to real historical females. Borrowed from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the term 'wo/man' will be used to include all women, and oppressed and marginalized men.

7. Feminist interpretation invites and necessitates acknowledgment of how a reader's autobiography influences a reading or an historical reconstruction. So it is appropriate for me to mention that I still check 'Christian' on surveys, even 'Catholic' (though with great difficulty and some irony). For nearly a quarter of a century I would have checked 'democratic socialist feminist' if it ever appeared on a survey. I give here a reading by a white middle-class academic, living in Detroit (sometimes called 'America's Third World city'), who has actively

participated in the raising of two African-American godchildren, and who is learning on a daily basis about sexual, racial, and class oppression, the struggle against numbing forces, and the progress being made against those forces. My reading is grounded in the perspectives and questions of Women's Studies. It does not pretend to be objective, or complete, but rather to invite the reader into a conversation about assumptions, principles of interpretation, autobiographical influences, interests.

Literary Representations of Women

Many literary aspects demand attention in an analysis of the representation of women in the Gospels and Acts. Is a woman character named or unnamed? Is she identified by a relationship or an occupation? Where does she appear? Who speaks to her, and to whom does she speak? When is she silent? What is she praised or criticized for? What role does she play, and how does she function with regard to the *plot?* How is her relationship to Jesus and to other characters depicted, and her interaction with them? What are the dynamics of specific interactions between a woman and a man? Does there seem to be any intentional juxtaposition of male and female characters, for the purposes of comparing or contrasting? Can any patterns concerning the representation of women be detected in a specific work? Are there any strange omissions or puzzling aspects to the representation? How does the representation correlate with what is known historically about women, Jewish and Gentile, of this period? How does it correlate with what the reader knows about herself, and other women? Are there textual opportunities for the reader to experience irritation, boredom, elation, anger, challenge, comfort?

As a backdrop for the discussion of the representation of women who are present, it is necessary to notice the absent women: representations of women who do not appear. The exceptions to the following observations will stand out against this absence.

I see four absences, and as a *fifth* absence, I hear a loud silence:

1. In the Gospels and Acts we find no full, powerful representations of the deity as female. The divine is overwhelmingly male—God, Father, Lord—and spoken of with male pronouns. There is no figure like the goddesses Demeter or Isis, although language and concepts from the cult of the latter have been appropriated especially in the Gospel of John. Likewise, the power of evil, Satan or *diabolos*, is male.

2. The major character of these texts, Jesus Christ, is male, and said to be in a Father–Son relationship with God. He has a human mother and sisters (unnamed, unlike his brothers), but no woman character is represented as equal to him. Like a cowboy, he has no wife, no lover, no partner, no intimate companion, no fully mutual human relationship.

3. The characters who have and exercise political, religious, and economic power are male. There is no woman represented as having political power of her own, in her own right, only women like Herodias and Pilate's wife who manipulate the power of their husbands. No woman is said to belong to the sects of Pharisees, Sadducees, (the unmentioned) Essenes/Qumran, and there is no female scribe. There is no female head, official, or patron of a synagogue, no woman with a leadership role in the synagogue or the Jerusalem temple (although we know from inscriptional evidence that such women existed). No woman, except the bent woman of Lk. 13.10-17, is even depicted as attending the synagogue. There is no female member of the Sanhedrin, no female priest. No woman appears as a healer or is called 'wise one' or 'sage'. No woman is called 'teacher', and no woman discusses or debates with Jesus concerning the interpretation of Torah. No woman is depicted as a landowner, or tenant farmer, as farming or sowing or harvesting, or in charge of a workforce, or dealing in the market.

4. No woman is given the title 'apostle' or 'disciple', although many are said to 'follow', a term used for becoming a disciple. The inner circle called by Jesus consists of twelve named males and no women, and Acts 1.21, in an assertion of masculine privilege, insists the replacement of Judas the betrayer must be a male (*anēr*) who has been with the group from its beginning. The term disciple often refers to a wider group than the Twelve, but this wider group has traditionally been imagined as all male. No woman is said to have been called to leave all and follow Jesus, no woman is seen working side by side with him and the apostles or disciples, no woman is said to have been supported by or used the common purse. No woman names or illustrates the forces comparable to men's pride, ambition, fear, unbelief which make following difficult for them: the cost, that is, of their following. No woman is mentioned as participating in the Last Supper, or as sent by Jesus to preach or heal or teach or baptize or make disciples.

5. There is a loud silence between ordinary men and women in these texts, an absence of dialogue. Jesus speaks to many women and several women converse with him. But the male disciples do not speak to women, except to correct them: they rebuke the woman who anoints Jesus (Mk 14.5 and parallels) and those (presumably women) bringing children to Jesus (Mk 10.13 and parallels). They complain to Jesus about the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15.22), are amazed that he is talking to a Samaritan woman (Jn 4.27), and dismiss the message of the women at the tomb in Luke as nonsense (Lk. 24.11; cf. Markan Appendix 16.11). In Acts the two individual women spoken to in direct speech are condemned and silenced (Sapphira in Acts 5 is silenced by death; and the slave girl who has been annoying Paul in Acts 16 by an exorcism).

Against all that absence, what stands out? What flickers? For me, the representation of women serving. Women's contribution, when it is mentioned, is often called 'serving' (*diakoneō*). This is work that male disciples are never said to do in the Gospels. Women who 'serve' include Simon's mother-in-law (Mk 1.31 and parallels); women travelling with Jesus (Lk. 8.1-3); women at the cross (Mk 15.41; parallel Mt. 27.55; cf. Jn 12.26); Martha (Lk. 10.40; Jn 12.2). Servants/slaves also 'serve' (Lk. 17.8; cf. the noun *diakonos* [servant] in Mt. 22.13; Jn 2.5), as do angels (Mk 1.13; parallel Mt. 4.11), and Jesus, the 'Son of Man' or 'Human One' (Mk 10.45; parallel Mt. 20.28: 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'; cf. Lk. 22.27: 'I am among you as one who serves'; and 12.37 where the master serves the good servant).

What is this female 'service'? As depicted in the Gospels, it is traditionally read as attending to the physical needs of Jesus and his disciples, who are portrayed as being unemployed itinerants. They need food bought or gathered and cooked, clothes washed and mended, living space found, arranged, and cleaned, health care given, and so forth. In Lk. 8.1-3 it may mean giving financial support as well. It includes the jobs listed in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Mt. 25.31-46: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner. And, it can be added, standing by at the execution of the condemned, mourning, anointing the dead, even delivering to the men a message about or from the resurrected one. None of this is really

the type of serving Jesus is depicted as doing, except in a grand and symbolic fashion (the feeding of multitudes, the washing of the disciples' feet) or miraculously (curing, not caring for the sick).

Historical Assessment

I want to turn now to two different historical interpretations or assessments of the data of these impressions of women's absence and minimal, serving presence. First, it is still a common view (scholarly and non-scholarly) that a fairly accurate historical picture is given by such impressions of what is not in the texts and what is. This would mean that:

1. Metaphors for God were exclusively male in the Judaisms of the period, and men and women did not imagine or pray otherwise. That is to say, Jewish women of this time and place did not experience a connection with the divine in their femaleness.

2. The historical Jesus understood his relation to God only as to Father. He also indeed had no equal, no sexual relationship, no full human mutuality. He was unique in terms of exclusivity, privilege, and superiority.

3. Women were not in public political office, and had little social power. They were dependent economically on men, and their lives centered in the family and home. They were not participants in the world of business, and did not occupy public space with men.

4. Women had no official roles in the Judaisms of the period, were not members in any of the various sects, were not healers or teachers, and were not apostles or disciples in the Jesus movement. Rather, they were marginal to his (and every other contemporary) movement, mostly in a servant or mother/wife-like capacity. They waited on the males, enabling them. This assessment feeds the anti-Judaism mentioned above.

A second view, however, challenges the first. It can be argued that the picture drawn from these persistent general impressions is historically speaking distorted, partial, and inaccurate. The four Gospels and Acts represent women through the eyes of men, who are unaware of and/or suppressing women's achievements and presence. The sensation of

absence and minimal, subordinate presence of women in the Gospels and Acts gives an inaccurate historical understanding of the lives of women and of their participation in the Jesus movement. Other ways of thinking about and relating to God were available in the Judaisms of this period, as were other ways of thinking about and relating to Jesus than the ones delineated above.

Feminist scholarship at the end of the twentieth century is in the difficult process of shifting the weight of probability toward this second, alternative view of the historical reality—as far as it can be grasped, if it can be grasped at all, and in that we must try to grasp it. And this changes how we look at the literary representations of women. Recent studies, especially those of Ross Kraemer and Bernadette Brooten, of inscriptions, papyri, and archaeological as well as literary evidence concerning the lives of Jewish women in the Greco-Roman world, indicate that some women were religious officials, such as leaders of synagogues, some were learned in Torah, belonged to some sects of Judaism, achieved financial independence, ran businesses, related to men as equals. When the Gospels and Acts are examined more closely (in the context of these recent studies, and alongside the evidence from the letters of Paul in the 50s in which individual women are called coworker, apostle, patron, leader/president, deacon, diligent toiler, prophet), a host of exceptions make the picture more complicated. The backdrop of absence is rent by the dynamic presence of women, apparently doing more than 'serving'.

If we return to the four 'impressions' described above from the perspective of this second historical interpretation, a different picture begins to emerge:

1. For the reader who catches the resonances and allusions to the Hebrew Bible and inter-testamental literature, the mention in Matthew and Luke of the Sophia (Wisdom) of God evokes the divine figure of Woman Wisdom. In Jewish Wisdom theology, she searches for those who are willing to become wise, sends out prophets to call people to her banquet, saves those who seek her. She is architect of the world, sharing the throne of God, renewing everything. In Lk. 7.35 Jesus and John the Baptist are understood as among the 'children' of Wisdom. Luke 11.49 (cf. Lk. 13.34) implies that Jesus is a prophet and apostle of Sophia. Jesus speaks as Wisdom herself in Mt. 11.19, 28-30; 23.34, 37-39 (parallel Lk. 13.34-35). Most of these are sayings from Q, thought to articulate early understandings of Jesus, perhaps even something of his own prophetic self-understanding. In the

Gospel of John, Wisdom motifs are transformed and masculinized to speak of Jesus. Wisdom theology, then, is pervasive but 'submerged' in the Christian Testament. Masculine language and imagery for God is also (only) somewhat relieved by passages such as the parable of the sweeping woman (Lk. 15.8-10), seen as a metaphor for God, and by language about the not-quite-yet personal force of the Holy Spirit. The representation of women, then, is not totally without connection to an imagining of the divine in female, or neuter, terms. But that connection is tenuous and obscured.

2. While the Evangelists represent Jesus as superior to all other human beings, especially to those males who judge him, some women do stand up to him. One character—only one, male or female—the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7.24-30; parallel Mt. 15.21-28), has a snappy, human-to-human conversation with him, and bests him in argument. Another, the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.1-42), speaks with him with more assertiveness and curiosity than reverence. Also, there are characters Jesus is said in the Gospel of John to have 'loved': Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus (Jn 11.5). Many have read overtones of intimacy, romance, and/or eroticism in the encounter in Jn 20.14-17 between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene, later called the 'companion' of Jesus in the Gnostic *Gos. Phil.* 63.30. In the Gospel of John, too, Jesus calls his disciples 'friends' (15.14-15) and promises them empowerment (14.12) equal and even superior to his own.

3. Women's political power is depicted as indirect and with one evil exception, ineffectual. The unnamed wife of Pilate sends word to her husband on the judgment seat, attempting (unsuccessfully) to influence him to withdraw from judging the 'innocent man' she has encountered in a dream (Mt. 27.19). Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas, uses her daughter—the only woman depicted as an object of desire—to seduce him to murder John the Baptist (Mk 6.17-29; parallel Mt. 14.3-12). The Baptist and Herod and her own daughter are all Herodias's victims, as Jesus will be a victim of some of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Drusilla, the wife of Felix the procurator, makes an appearance by her husband's side, hears Paul speak on his faith, but says nothing (Acts 24.24-27). Bernice, sister of Herod Agrippa II, accompanies him to Caesarea; they hear Paul's self-defense. She may or may not be thought of as among those who said to one another, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment' (Acts 26.30-32).

There are strong traces, however, of women's religious power. Some women in Luke's two works are called prophets. They are mute prophets: their mouths are moving, but we read no words. Said to live in the Jerusalem temple, the widow Anna is a prophet who 'gave thanks to God and spoke of him [God? the child?] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem', but Luke does not record her words (2.36-38; contrast the speech of Simeon [Lk. 2.34-35]). The women and Mary the mother of Jesus are apparently among the 'all' who were 'filled with the Holy Spirit' at Pentecost (Acts 1.14; 2.1). Acts 2.17-21, quoting Joel 3.14 LXX, speaks of the Spirit poured out on all 'my menservants and maidservants…your sons and your daughters'. Luke adds: 'and they shall prophesy'. But the maidservants are strangely silent. Philip (one of the seven) has four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21.9), but again, nothing of their prophecy is written (contrast the treatment of the prophet Agabus in the next few verses).

Shortly before his arrest, a woman anoints Jesus, thus making him The Anointed One (= Messiah, *Christos*), and setting in motion the final events. In Mk 14.3-9 (parallel Mt. 26.6-13; cf. Jn 12.1-8; contrast Lk. 7.36-50), this dramatic action by a woman evokes prophetic activity like that of Samuel, Zadok, and Elijah, anointing kings (see 1 Sam. 10.1; 15.1; 16.3; 1 Kgs 1.39, 45; 19.15-16; 2 Kgs 9.6 [cf. 11.12]; Dan. 9.24). The act is one of choice, designation, and empowerment. She is not called a prophet, however, and no words spoken by her interpret her action. Rather, Jesus gives the interpretation. The power of her (originally) politico-religious action is undercut as it becomes a focus of discussion about 'the poor' and as it is said to prefigure the anointing of his corpse (women's work). By the placement of the story in Mark and Matthew, and by the naming of the protester in John, the woman is reduced to the antithesis of Judas. Her power is finally erased and privatized by romantic sentimentalizing and trivializing commentary. The standing woman of Mark and Matthew becomes one bent down at his feet (Jn 12.3) and a groveling, repentant sinner (Lk. 7.36-50).

Again without being given the title, Elizabeth and Mary—both pregnant—function as prophets in Luke 1, in their recognition of the importance of Mary's pregnancy and her belief, and of God's vindication of the oppressed. In a homo-social world, this is the only instance of women bonding. Only three times in the Gospels and Acts do women even speak to each other. This time it is to bless and praise; the other conversations are between Herodias and her daughter, about murder, and among the women on the way to the tomb, about their inability to move the stone.

In Acts Priscilla is said to have travelled with Paul, and taught Apollos 'more accurately about the way of God' (Acts 18.18, 24-26), but her teaching does not survive. There is apparently a women's Sabbath prayer place (or synagogue?) at Philippi, by the riverside (outdoors?), mentioned in Acts 16.13, but the tantalizing reference is without description of the women's activities. Acts 9.2 may imply women's presence in the synagogues of Damascus; 17.1-4 mentions 'not a few of the leading women' of Thessalonica being 'persuaded' and joining Paul and Silas after his three-week presentation in a synagogue. 'Devout women of high standing' are said to have been incited by 'Jews' against Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13.50). Luke notes that Jewish-Christian women were pursued and imprisoned by Saul as vigorously as male Jewish Christians (Acts 8.3; 9.2). He mentions several times that the multitude of new believers included men and women (Acts 5.14; 8.12; 17.12; Damaris named in 17.34) as did the followers of Simon the Samaritan (Acts 8.9-12).

In a social context where most women (and men) lived in a state of poverty, the economic power of some stands out. Women are mentioned in Lk. 8.1-3 as serving Jesus and the male disciples 'out of their means', probably a reference to philanthropic financial support of the Jesus movement, using their own resources. One among them, Joanna, is the wife of an administrator serving Herod. Women are included in the 'all' who practiced primitive communism in the idealized early church, holding all things in common (Acts 2.44-45; 4.32; cf. the story of Ananias and Sapphira, 5.1-11). Acts also mentions wealthy women as supporters of the movement: Gentile women 'of high standing' are said to have believed (Acts 17.12). Other women are described as involved in, perhaps even owning, a small business: Tabitha of Joppa was a maker of tunics and other garments, who was known for good works and acts of charity (Acts 9.36-42); Lydia, 'a worshipper of God', was a seller of purple goods (Acts 16.14); Priscilla and her husband Aquila were tentmakers (Acts 18.3). Houses are said to belong to women: Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12.12) and Lydia (Acts 16.15). Some women who are named are identified by their own names only, unattached to the names of husband/fathers/sons; they appear to be independent, autonomous.

4. Women can be said to function—differently in each work—*as* disciples or apostles, although they are not given these titles. Comparison of the Gospel accounts shows the strength of traditions that identify specific women as important to the movement during its foundational

moments. Comparison also offers evidence of where those traditions have been weakened. In the Synoptic Gospels, named women appear as courageous, faithful 'followers' from Galilee to the Jerusalem crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb of Jesus. They are present at the execution, when the male disciples have all fled (Mk 14.50; parallel Mt. 26.56; the fleeing is omitted by Luke). Their names hammer the tradition securely, though little is left but the names. At the cross Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and of Joses, and Salome (15.40); Matthew alters this to read Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (27.56; cf. 20.20). Luke lists Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women who reported the resurrection (24.10; at the cross, only 'all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee', 23.49). John depicts Jesus' mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene (19.25), and the male Beloved Disciple (v. 26) standing by the cross.

In the Synoptics, the women at the tomb receive a revelation: the empty tomb means Jesus has been raised. The women are commissioned in Mk 16.7, followed by Mt. 28.7, to bring the news of Jesus' resurrection to the disciples. In Mark, the women's message is not delivered, while in Matthew it is delivered and, apparently, believed. Contrast these accounts with Lk. 24.5-7 where the women are *not* commissioned, only told to remember Jesus' words about rising on the third day. They deliver the message of the empty tomb to the disciples, but are disbelieved (see also the Markan Appendix 6.10); the men come to believe, not because of the witness of women, but because they see for themselves (Lk. 24.31-35; Jn 20.8, 19-29; cf. 4.41-42). In Mt. 28.9-10 the women (and Mary Magdalene alone in John 20.14-18 as well as the Markan Appendix 16.9) experience(s) the first appearance of the risen Jesus. In contrast, the first appearance is to Simon (Peter) in Lk. 24.34 (cf. the list of appearances in 1 Cor. 15.3-7, where the first appearance is to Cephas; no women are mentioned).

The representation here is quite striking: women and death, women and a tomb, women claiming insight about a life beyond death—based on emptiness and on absence ('he is not here') interpreted by a man, an angel, or two angels. Scholars debate whether the story of women and the empty tomb is historically grounded, or a late legend (created, for example, to bolster belief in the corporeal nature aspect of the appearance stories, or to undercut the status of women as witnesses). Whatever the original layer of telling(s), this is the point at which the

early efforts to rework, revise, retract, restrain, reinterpret this central role of women are most interesting. Receiving a commission and witnessing a post-resurrection appearance clearly functioned to authorize individuals in the early church (see 1 Cor. 9.1 where Paul asks, 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?'). The confusions and contradictions in these narratives signal, to my mind, ancient anxiety, even guilt.

Reading backwards from the powerful conclusions of the Gospels, we find a few strong women making speaking appearances during the ministry of Jesus. In Jn 11.27, Martha voices a dynamic Christological affirmation: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world'. This can be seen to parallel the affirmation made by Peter in the Synoptics (Mk 8.29 and parallels: 'You are the Christ'). She and her sister Mary express faith in Jesus' power over sickness ('Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died', vv. 21, 32), which leads to the raising of Lazarus. Luke 10.38-42 depicts these two sisters also: Martha complains boldly to Jesus, a guest in her house, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Then tell her to help me.' Jesus, however, defends Mary who sits in silence at his feet listening to his teaching ('Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her').

The unnamed Samaritan woman in Jn 4.4-42 engages in a far-ranging dialogue with Jesus, covering the topics of Jewish–Samaritan hostilities, the thirst for 'living water', her own marital history, his prophetic insight into true worship. It culminates in his revelation of himself to her as the Christ and her tentative acceptance of this revelation. She functions as a quasi-missionary to her village (the first to the Samaritans; contrast Acts 8.5, where this mission is carried out by Philip); but she is not explicitly 'sent', and her witnessing is overpowered by the villagers hearing for themselves.

The unnamed Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7.24-30, parallel Mt. 15.21-28), alone and on her own initiative (like the woman with the flow of blood in Mk 5.25-34 and parallels), begs Jesus to exorcize her little daughter. He rebuffs her with a remark about the children (Jews) first being fed: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (Gentiles). Is he joking? Is this a trick question to test her, while all along he knows what he will do? Or—more likely, but harder to reconcile with Christian belief—is Jesus prejudiced, using a derogatory slur? Swallowing the insult, she bests Jesus in argument: 'Sir, even the dogs under the children's table eat the children's crumbs'. In Mark's telling, for this *logos* (saying, teaching, argument) she wins her

exorcism. Geographical references in Mark permit a reading of her success as opening Jesus' own Jewish movement toward the Gentiles. She has changed his mind, taught him the extent of his career of healing, and its timing. The pericope that soon follows her story is the feeding of the Four Thousand. The seven baskets of fragments gathered there may represent the Gentiles, with the twelve baskets gathered at the prior feeding representing the Jews (8.18-21). Both the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Samaritan woman represent women and Gentiles in their struggles to participate in the movement.

It looks, then, as though a few women function as unofficial religious leaders. They make important, break-through insights, challenge Jesus' own understanding of his mission, stand by him when he is arrested and executed, discover and (except in Mark) report the empty tomb. Their leadership, however, is, one might say, belated: it is clear only in retrospect, after the stories are told/read and re-told. In the Gospel narratives, the women are recognized as leading no one. They are thrown into shadow in the Synoptics by the Twelve; an inner circle that some scholars argue may not have been created by the historical Jesus but by early post-Easter efforts of men to bolster their own authority. In John they are overshadowed by the Beloved Disciple, Peter, and other males.

Women as Those Who Serve

The issue of women 'serving' bears a closer look, in terms of power. The verb *diakonein* ('to serve') and the nouns *diakonia* ('service') and *diakonos* ('servant') have a range of meaning signaled by the different ways in which they are translated, such as 'to minister' or 'to provide'. In spite of the fact that Acts 6.2 connects the verb with waiting on tables (a job the Twelve object to having to do), the other occurrences in Acts show that these were technical terms for ministry, i.e., for preaching, eucharistic celebration, and church leadership (Acts 1.17, 25; 6.4; 12.25; 19.22; 20.24; 21.19). It is probable that in some instances in the Gospels (e.g., the story of Martha and Mary in Lk. 10.38-42; the travelling women Lk. 8.1-3) this technical usage should be heard, smudged evidence of women's leadership in the early decades, in a process of being debated and diminished. In Acts women are not said to serve, only men. These multidimensional texts are evidence of power struggles in the authors' own times and communities. The Gospel representations of women serving are even more chilling seen from this angle.

The servant idea in the Christian Testament, then, is double-sided. There is service as empowered/empowering ministry, and service as—well—(literally) service. Throughout the tradition, service is expected of males, valued for the community as a whole, celebrated as a source of strength rather than of oppression. But still it is a danger. It is true that it is those with power who are called to serve those with less; not those in subordinate positions instructed to continue waiting on those with more status.[3] But in the second, servile sense Jesus does not serve the women, or prevent them from serving him or the disciples. It is natural that many women and men would read the dominant representation of female service in this second sense as a model meant to continue.

This representation is in the process of a great change: the once-dominant, generally positive impression of women as servants is shifting as women readers shift their sense of themselves, and reevaluate the biblical traditions, learning to resist them. Women's serving is a part of the feminine stereotype that describes women as sympathetic and service-oriented. No male is shown or told to serve the women in these texts; no one challenges the common division of the caring and being cared for. Unbalanced relations of power especially underlie the gender division of food provision: women, subservient and subordinate, are the servers and providers of food for men, except when it is spiritual food. When it is estimated that women in our culture do more than half of all human work, with three fourths of our work unpaid and benefitting men, the representation looks all too literal.

The service of the women is not like that of the Son of Man, who vigorously teaches, preaches, heals, empowers, confronts authorities, leads, with all his talents. It is rather the wife-like presence always necessary for running a *house*, maintaining the household economy, holding a family together. It is like the service of workers who anonymously build a city, a bridge, a skyscraper, a house, a machine, clean public and private toilets. For women, servants, and slaves, there is coercion, not full choice, in their serving. I see them as the face of the exploited. With its praise for the victim, the remark of a woman in John Updike's novel, *Brazil*, captures this dynamic of oppression: 'The blacks will never revolt, there or here. They are too happy and good. They are too beautiful. Always it was so.' Many women have internalized the image of those who serve as happy and good and beautiful. It

3. Cf. Joanna Dewey, 'Women in the Gospel of Mark', *Word and World* 26 (2006), pp. 22-29.

is an image that is re-enforced by many of the biblical traditions. It is the powerful ancestor of ideals such as the nineteenth-century 'angel in the house'. Some who enact or perform the text, who try to live the interpretation, take the representations of woman serving to represent the main or only possibility for women in Christianity.

Must this theological ideal be killed by women in order for them to produce their own theology? Schüssler Fiorenza warns of the connection between the sacrificial service of Christian women and feminine romance attitudes toward Jesus as their great hero and liberator.[4] Noticing that the *real* servants are overwhelmingly poor, Black, and Third World, and that those who claim to be the servants of God and the people are most often of the dominant culture, white and/or male, Jaqueline Grant considers servant language and imagery to undergird much of the human structures of oppression and injustice. She names this 'the sin of servanthood': for women of color 'the sin is not the lack of service, but too much service… [B]eing a true "servant" may mean relinquishing the dubious honor of servanthood.'[5]

The faces of the exceptional women whose features are more delineated should not obscure this other smudged face: of the women who are silent or almost silent, mostly nameless or named without a story. 'The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman', noted Virginia Woolf. Feminist liberation theologies have urged that the Christ be (re)made in their image, the image of these quiet working ones. And perhaps something of this happens when the text is focalized this way: the representation of the Christ becomes a representation of a man trying to be a wo/man and urging other men to do so; or talking about trying to do this, but not quite succeeding (talking too much, being waited on). Some view him as engaging in gender bending, in what Sarah Ruddick calls maternal thinking: he nurtures, is concerned for children (Mk 10.13), he wishes to comfort and stop the violence (Mt. 23.37-39; parallel Lk. 13.34-35). He feeds, washes feet, he weeps (Lk. 19.41; Jn 11.35), he experiences intimacy (Jn 13.23). Most importantly, in his career and execution he struggles against oppression at 'the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid'.[6] Not a

4. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 14.

5. Jaqueline Grant, 'The Sin of Servanthood: And the Deliverance of Discipleship', in *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (ed. Emily M. Townes; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 199-218 (199).

6. Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

'real man', he represents Sophia as a wo/man. The representation of woman (an unstable term, as we have said) in these texts should therefore include the representation of Jesus as a wo/man. It is an insight grasped, if dimly, by some mawkish artistic treatments of him, and grasped profoundly by medieval mystics. Susannah Heschel writes of Jesus as a 'theological transvestite' who destabilizes the boundaries between male and female. '[F]rom the Gospel accounts, modern scholars found that Jesus' teachings laud gentleness, the meek, and the cheek; he is himself pierced, wounded; he bleeds, suffers, and dies. At the same time, however, he is a man whose closest associates are men, not women; who proclaims himself one with the Father, whose death is overcome by the erection of resurrection.'[7] He—and the serving women—'queer' our understanding of boundaries.

The word 'servant' and the word 'woman' are multilayered and slippery, and bristling with stereotypes accepted and challenged. We find ourselves losing our balance: What do these words mean? How are they being used? How should they be used? Of what are they representations? Do they refer to anything but how one acts, what one does? We come face to face with deep social and personal problems, and values that are in the process of change. We glimpse ways in which boundaries have been established and reestablished, by denigration (misogyny and anti-Judaism) and by dogma, hierarchies, and androcentric tellings and retellings.

The issue of titles is also significant in this context. Feminist biblical studies have insisted that while no women are given the titles of disciple or apostle, some of them, the exceptional ones, are apostles and disciples because they act as such. Women identify them as such and read themselves into these roles. I applaud the boldness of such readings that claim the titles that are not given. But if we do not presume that men are the norm against which women as different or women as equal are measured, we may be open to seeing in the representation of women an alternative account, an alternative viewpoint. The strategy that takes the titles sees the representation of women in these texts as characterized by lack or absence (of titles, authorization, recognition, attention), and then re-characterizes them by the filling of that lack. But if we cease to measure the women against the men, different voices and values can be heard. Marginality may be used to

7. Susannah Heschel, 'Jesus as Theological Transvestite', in *Judaism since Gender* (ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levit; New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 188-99 (192).

subvert the phallocentric order. While liberal feminism addresses the problem of female inequality within the symbolic order, radical feminism works to abolish that order and the value system it represents. Perhaps the women, exceptional and otherwise, should be thought of not as apostles and disciples of a Master, but as something else. Something for which we need a name. Something that questions the dominating presence and privilege of Jesus.

Conclusion

Obviously every passage that mentions women or might be relevant to the representation of women has not been treated here. A selection has been made on the basis of what interests me, what has proved interesting to other feminist scholars, and what I hope will whet the appetite of the reader of this essay. The texts are both familiar and strange to me; they evade any attempt to give 'the' meaning and so stifle other readings. I have not, then, written about 'the' (re)presentation of women, but only given my representation of the representations, which will surely differ from that of another reader.

One important question for the contemporary reader is, do we have in the representations of women in the Gospels and Acts enough traces to enable us to create female precursors, who prove by their example that revolt against patriarchal/kyriarchal authority is possible; models, that is, to legitimate today's endeavors? Can these traces represent me? Us? The un-mastered Syro-Phoenician woman and the Samaritan woman seem to me the strongest traces, points of entry. Nameless, faceless, contentious, they are 'independently memorable'. Both have an attitude, and it is not that of deference. They help us step outside the ideology of the text.

The epigram that opened this chapter speaks of the female writer. Once the distortions of representations of women in the Gospels and Acts are recognized, then the texts' partial natures, their actual dimensions, are recognized. The need is apparent for new and old texts, in which women describe their own reality and represent themselves. Female writers of the late twentieth century are 'pioneers in a creativity so intense that their male counterparts have probably not experienced its analog since the Renaissance or at least since the Romantic era',[8] or perhaps since the first century CE. Critique of the

8. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000 [1979]), p. 50.

canonical texts and creating alternatives to these culturally dominant representations (sometimes out of their fragments) are not two mutually exclusive alternatives. Both can be acts of resistance that shape consciousness, and both can produce the understanding necessary for action that improves the world we live in.

5

RECONCEIVING THE MOTHER OF JESUS AND HIS BIRTH*

The New Testament infancy narratives are of tremendous significance because of the impact they have had on the image and reality of women in the West, particularly in relation to social control of women's bodies and women's sexuality. These texts have been read traditionally as making a unique claim: that Jesus the Messiah was virginally conceived: that is, that his mother became pregnant solely by the power of divine creativity, and not as a result of sexual intercourse.[1] But have the New Testament texts been properly understood? I think they have not; in fact they *could* not have been within the confining structures of patriarchal religion.

Reading from the perspective of a woman (shaped by her own particular context) and as a reader resisting some aspects of the authors' thought,[2] I propose that Mt. 1.1-15 and Lk. 1.20-56; 3.23-28 were originally about an illegitimate conception, not a virginal conception. It was the intention—or better, an intention—of Matthew and of Luke to hand down the tradition they inherited: that Jesus the Messiah had been illegitimately conceived during the period when his mother Mary

* This essay originally appeared under the title 'The Foremothers and the Mother of Jesus', *Concilium* 229 (1989), pp. 447-57, and in *The Feminist Companions to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 149-58. It has been emended here in consultation with another essay, 'Feminist Interpretations of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew', *JFSR* 13 (1997), pp. 35-62.

1. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX* (AB, 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

2. See Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Elaine Showalter (ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory* (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1985).

was betrothed to Joseph. At the pre-gospel stage, this illegitimate conception tradition, which probably originated in the circle of the family of Jesus, had already been understood theologically as due in some unexplained way to the power of the Holy Spirit. In both of the Gospel accounts, Jesus' biological father is absent and unnamed, but the adoption by Joseph incorporates the child into the Davidic line. Both evangelists express the faith conviction that in spite of his human origins, the child will be God's since the Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for this conception. In both Gospels this conviction is presented by depicting an angelic announcement that the pregnancy is divinely ordained.

Reading the New Testament narratives in terms of an illegitimate conception, rather than a virginal conception, offers a consistent explanation of many small details. None of the explanations offered here, taken alone, is convincing enough to challenge the traditional interpretation of the infancy narratives. The cumulative effect of these explanations, however, does pose that challenge. In this essay I will focus on four elements of the Matthean narrative.[3]

The Genealogy

Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus Christ (1.1-17). The genealogy includes unexpectedly four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba) and concludes in v. 16 with mention of a fifth, Mary, 'of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah'.[4]

Why did Matthew choose these particular women as 'the foremothers'? What do they have in common and how might this prepare the reader for the story of Mary that follows? A careful look at the stories of the four in the Hebrew Bible shows that their sociological situations are comparable.[5] (1) All four find themselves outside patriarchal family structures: Tamar and Ruth are childless young widows (Tamar later becomes pregnant by her father-in-law); Rahab is a prostitute (if the Rahab in Joshua is the one Matthew is thinking of); Bathsheba is an adulteress and then a widow pregnant with her lover's

3. For a fuller discussion of these issues and of the Lukan Infancy Narrative, see my book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

4. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations in this essay are from the NRSV.

5. See Susan Niditch, 'The Wronged Woman Righted', *HTR* 72 (1979), pp. 143-49.

child. (2) All four are 'wronged' or thwarted by the male world. Without claiming a full feminist consciousness for the authors of these narratives, we can claim an awareness, however dim, that society was patriarchal, and that this caused suffering for women in certain circumstances. (3) In their sexual activity all four risk damage to the social order and their own condemnations.[6] Accusation of improper sexual conduct is actually made in the case of Tamar, implicit in the case of Rahab, avoided in Ruth's case by the secrecy of Boaz, and leveled in Bathsheba's case against her partner. (4) The situations of all four are righted by the actions of men who acknowledge guilt and/or accept responsibility for them, drawing them under patriarchal protection, giving them identity and a future, legitimating them and their children-to-be. The mention of the four women is intended to lead Matthew's reader to expect another story of a woman who becomes a social misfit in some way; is wronged or thwarted; is party to a sexual act that places her in great danger; and whose story has an outcome which repairs the social fabric and ensures the birth of a child who is legitimate or legitimated.[7]

Further, what do these stories of the foremothers have in common theologically, and what is the reader led to expect theologically? The

6. In Ruth's case, it may perhaps have been only suspicion of sexual activity (see the commentaries on Ruth 3.4, 7-9, 12-13).

7. Gail Paterson Corrington has proposed that the four women in the genealogy share with Mary a certain 'irregularity' with respect to their social roles, employing means outside of traditional marriage to preserve the safety of their households (*Her Image of Salvation* [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992]). The wife of Uriah, however, does not fit into this scheme, since it is the action of King David (rather than Bathsheba) that is 'irregular'. Elaine Wainwright views each woman as a threat or challenge to the patriarchal order, encoding aspects of women's power and introducing tension into the story that subsequently guides the reader ('The Gospel of Matthew', in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* [ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994], pp. 635-77). But again, the wife of Uriah does not fit the analysis; she is preyed upon by the king who holds power over her. Janice Capel Anderson sees a more ambiguous situation in which the women celebrate female initiative, faith, and reproductive power, but are also domesticated, containing power in a patriarchal package ('Matthew: Gender and Reading', *Semeia* [1983], pp. 3-27 [20-21]). However, Bathsheba does not fit; her seduction/rape by the king while she was the wife of Uriah is hardly an example of female initiative. A.-J. Levine views the women as examples of higher righteousness, although for this to work, Uriah, who is named, must replace his unnamed wife, making Bathsheba the problem ('Matthew', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* [ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, exp. edn, 1998), pp. 339-49 [340-41]).

stories show a significant *lack* of miraculous, direct intervention on the part of God, to right the wrongs or remove the shame, or illuminate the consciousness, or shatter the structures. The stories are instead examples of the divine concealed in and nearly obliterated by human actions, and they share an outlook that stresses God as creator of the context of human freedom. Matthew leads his reader to expect a story which will continue this subtle theologizing, a story rather of divine accommodation to human freedom in the complexity of near-tragedy.

The Marital and Legal Situation

Reading as a woman, aware that all women live with male violence,[8] I am deeply interested in how seduction or rape would be legally determined, what would be the fate of the woman involved, and, in a case involving pregnancy and birth, what would be the fate or status of the child. Examination of these issues poignantly heightens awareness of a woman's legal helplessness and the role and strength of patriarchal attitudes toward women and toward illegitimate children, whom Joachim Jeremias thinks were among those called in rabbinical sources 'the excrement of the community'.[9]

In the Palestine of the first century CE, the marriage of a young girl took place in two stages. First came the betrothal, which was a formal exchange in the presence of witnesses of the agreement to marry, and the paying of the bride price. The betrothal constituted a legally ratified marriage, since it began the girl's transfer from her father's power to her husband's, giving the latter legal rights over her, and giving her, for many purposes, the status of a married woman. The betrothal could be broken only by his divorce of her, and any violation by her of his marital 'rights' during this period (when she continued to live in her father's house for about a year) was considered adultery. The second stage was the marriage proper, the transfer of the girl to her husband's home where he assumed her support. Only at this point did she definitely pass into her husband's power. It was normally assumed that

8. This is not to say that all women experience male violence in the same way, nor to deny that all men live without male violence.

9. See Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 341-42, 337 and the rabbinical references therein to *mamzerim*, a term with a wide range of meanings. Jeremias, unfortunately, does not give us the source of date of this quotation; he thinks the oldest rabbinical view is that a *mamzer* was a child conceived in adultery. Abortion and infanticide were not practiced by Jews, according to various pagan sources.

the girl was a virgin at the time of her betrothal, and, at least in Galilee, also at the time of completed marriage.

In Mt. 1.18-25, Mary is described as having been found pregnant in the period between the betrothal and the completed marriage, before she and Joseph 'came together', probably meaning before Mary was brought to Joseph's home. Joseph's reaction in v. 19 makes it plain that he is not responsible for the pregnancy (and v. 25 will underline this). Adultery or rape are two normal ways Joseph has of explaining the pregnancy with which he is confronted. The case of a betrothed virgin's sexual intercourse with someone other than her husband during the period of betrothal is handled in the Hebrew Bible only in Deut. 22.23-27, the text many scholars think is alluded to by both evangelists:

> If there is a betrothed virgin (MT *na'ărâ bĕtûlâ;* LXX *pais parthenos*) and a man meets her in the city, and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help, though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's wife; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.[10] But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But to the young woman you shall do nothing; in the young woman there is no offence punishable by death, for this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor; because he came upon her in the open country and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

It is important that we try to determine as far as possible how this law was applied in Matthew's time, and the range of options that would be presented in such a case as he describes, involving pregnancy. (1) There is evidence that in a hearing before a judge or judges there would be an effort to go beyond Deuteronomy and not make everything turn on the scene of the act. For example, according to Philo, it had to be questioned whether she cried out and resisted, or co-operated willingly, or even whether she *could* cry out and resist, or was gagged and bound, overcome by superior strength, and whether the man had accomplices.[11] (2) There is evidence also of a less severe legal system

10. The commentaries refer to this case as 'seduction': the man 'seizes' the virgin who does not resist; this is considered adultery on the part of both.

11. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.77-78. See Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.23 nos. 251-52, and 11QTemple 66.4-5. For further discussion see Schaberg, *Illegitimacy of Jesus*, pp. 47-53.

in the first century, according to which the death penalty would not be enforced for an adulteress, but divorce was probably obligatory. (3) There may have existed in some circles as well a rigorous *halakah* which required the layman (as well as the priest) to divorce even a raped woman; under a less severe *halakah*, divorce of the raped woman by the layman was not obligatory but probably allowed. (4) If no hearing was held, the woman may have been presumed guilty, and divorce would be the outcome, possibly on trivial grounds. (5) Concerning the fate of children of an adulteress, Sir. 23.22-26 contains harsh words: her cursed memory and disgrace live on in them (cf. Wis. 3.16-19), and punishment falls on them (perhaps the assembly's decision that they are illegitimate, and the husband's rejection of them as his heirs). They are piously wished premature deaths and sterile unions. We can suspect that the children of raped women or women only suspected of adultery were also such social misfits. (6) Finally, let me mention what has been called 'the humane provision of Israel's regulations concerning adoption': the ruling principle was that any male child accepted under the rule of the head of a family was considered his son in all respects.[12]

In Matthew's opening lesson on righteousness and Torah, Joseph, 'a just man' (that is, Torah-observant), and unwilling to expose his wife to public disgrace, 'resolved to divorce her quietly' (1.19). The logic of the story indicates that Joseph felt himself obligated, or allowed, to divorce rather than complete the marriage.[13] I take this to mean that he ruled out the hearing to determine whether Mary had been seduced or raped, thus shielding her (and himself) from public shame and questioning, from the possibility of conviction on the charge of adultery, with its most likely punishment of a degrading divorce, attendant indignities, and a bleak future, and perhaps from the reasonable likelihood that rape could not be proven.[14]

The angelic message in vv. 20-21, however, urges the home-taking, the completion of the marriage: 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid

12. C. Tchernowitz, 'The Inheritance of Illegitimate Children according to Jewish Law', in *Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel Abrahams* (ed. G.A. Kohut; New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1927), pp. 402-403.

13. The phrase about the Holy Spirit in v. 18 is read by most critics as an aside to the reader.

14. No Hebrew Bible text describes a situation in which it is discovered during the betrothal period that the girl was not 'seduced' but willingly had intercourse with someone other than her fiancé. Most commentators presume that Matthew indicates a situation in which Mary is suspected to have consented to sexual intercourse.

to take Mary your wife into your home, for the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit'. One critic comments, 'The angel, by removing the suspicion of adultery and of violence, makes Mary acceptable to her husband'.[15] In my judgment, home-taking would remove the suspicion of adultery; a Torah-observant man would probably not complete the marriage with an adulteress. But the home-taking would *not* remove the suspicion of rape: a Torah-observant layman, following the *halakah* that allowed him to marry a raped woman, could proceed with the marriage. Since in the Gospel, Matthew insists that the Torah is valid and must be interpreted without relaxation (5.18-19), on the hermeneutical principle of the priority of the love command, we can say he intends the angelic solution to the dilemma to be a righteous and legal one. It is as well the most merciful alternative offered by the Law; we can conjecture that it may have been the rarest and most unexpected. Joseph, in accepting the pregnant Mary into his home, accepts responsibility for the child she is carrying. The words to Joseph in 1.21, 'You will call his name Jesus', are equivalent to a formula of adoption. Joseph, by exercising the father's right to name the child, acknowledges Jesus and thus becomes his adoptive and legal father.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

What does Matthew mean when he says in v. 18 that Mary was found pregnant 'through the Holy Spirit', and in v. 20 that 'the child begotten in her is through the Holy Spirit'? Few modern critics think that these verses refer to anything but a virginal conception, a counter-explanation to human paternity. It is rapidly becoming a scholarly consensus, however, that the idea of a virginal conception is found nowhere but in the two New Testament infancy narratives, and that there are no real parallels in the Hebrew or Greek Bible, in inter-testamental literature, or in the Pauline or Johannine writings; nor is the idea alluded to anywhere else in the New Testament. Critics generally agree that there are no real pagan parallels either, since pagan myths consistently involve a type of *hieros gamos* or divine marriage, with pregnancy resulting from sexual penetration of some sort.[16]

15. A. Tosato, 'Joseph, Being a Just Man', *CBQ* 41 (1979), pp. 547-51 (551).

16. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

In all the relevant Jewish and New Testament literature, divine begetting presupposes and does not replace human parenting. There are texts that speak of divine begetting to stress that God's power is the ultimate source of human life and degeneration,[17] or to stress that God elects an individual to s special status, promise, and obligation.[18] In this sense authors of Christian Scriptures refer to Isaac as 'begotten according to the Spirit' (Gal. 4.29, *gennētheis…kata pneuma*, in contrast with Ishmael's being begotten according to the flesh) and to Christians begotten by the Spirit or by God (Jn 1.12-13; 3.3-8; 1 Jn 2.29; 3.9; 4.7; 5.1-4, 18). There is no context in Jewish literature that would lead one to conclude that because Jesus was God's son, he had no human father.[19]

If this is the case, that being 'begotten according to the Spirit' was not understood in Jewish circles (however Hellenized) to cancel out or replace human paternity, then the paternity of Joseph is not the historical situation 'behind' this text in what has been called the most Jewish of Gospels. The claim that Matthew (and Luke) make, that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, must be taken seriously. The evangelists, or their tradition, are not just replacing Joseph with God to glorify Jesus. Reading this way is less controversial, but it does not take into account the likelihood of what the phrases about begetting may have communicated early on. It also does not take into account the setting of the pregnancy in the period of betrothal; this can be a 'heightening' of the miraculous (a biological virgin, rather than a [fully] married woman, conceives) only if the notion of a miraculous virginal conception is evoked by the phrases.

My suggestion for reading Matthew is a simple one: since nothing in the context of Matthew 1 requires us to read the phrases in terms of a virginal conception, they should be read in a figurative or symbolic

17. God 'acts' behind or in human parenting. In this sense, the initial act of creation is reenacted at the birth of every human being.

18. In this sense Israel is begotten by God, and certain persons (for example, patriarchs, kings, prophets, and messiahs) are empowered for exceptional destinies.

19. Cf. Raymond E. Brown *et al.* (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 92-93; F.L. Horton, Jr, 'Parenthetical Pregnancy: The Conception and Birth of Jesus in Matthew 1', in *SBL Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 180-86; Schaberg, *Illegitimacy of Jesus*, p. 220 nn. 201-202. Dale C. Allison, Jr (*The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993], pp. 146-51) pieces together the late rabbinical texts with *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 9 to support the plausibility that Moses' conception was seen as 'miraculous, due to the direct intervention of God' (p. 150), but these texts do not illustrate a first-century CE belief in a virginal conception.

sense. On the one hand, God is the ultimate power of life behind and in this as in all conceptions. Yet my sense is Matthew means more than—but not less than—this. In the situation he has described, this dimension of meaning is extremely significant: this child's existence is not an accident or mistake, and is not cursed. But Matthew is also clearly speaking about the election of this child from the womb for a role in Israel's history: Jesus will save his people from their sins (1.21), and will be called Emmanuel (1.23). Further, this begetting constitutes him Son of God in a special sense, as the one who sums up in his existence the whole history of Israel.

Isaiah 7.14

Between the angel's words to Joseph and Joseph's obedience to those words, Matthew inserts his first fulfillment citation: 'All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold the virgin (*parthenos*) will conceive and will give birth to a son and they will call his name Emmanuel".' The sign offered by Isaiah to King Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite war in the eighth century BCE was the imminent birth of a child naturally conceived, who would signal God's presence and care for Judah. The Greek translation of Isaiah's Hebrew '*almâ* (young woman) by *parthenos* (virgin) does not indicate a miraculous conception. Rather the Greek translator simply meant that one who is *now* a virgin will conceive by natural means. Matthew himself added the citation to a pre-existing narrative or body of infancy tradition.

But why, of all the texts available to him, did Matthew choose this one to elucidate and support his story of the origins of Jesus? I think it is likely that the word *parthenos* played a role in his choice. But Matthew was not thinking of a virgin conceiving miraculously, but of the law in Deut. 22.22-27 concerning the seduction or rape of a betrothed virgin, the law he presupposed in his presentation of the dilemma of Joseph. Although he does not quote the law, this is the catchword association that triggered his use of Isa. 7.14. This would mean that he understood the text as the Greek translator did, referring to one who *was* a virgin and later conceived naturally. The placement of the citation underscores the way the divine assurance overturns Joseph's decision to divorce Mary.

The problem before Matthew was to make theological sense of a tradition concerning the illegitimate pregnancy. If we pause for a minute and ask what texts and traditions were available to him to be

used for such a purpose, we find that none would be clear and unambiguous choices. No text in the Hebrew Bible I can think of fully vindicates a wronged woman who has been seduced or raped, or legitimates the child born of such a union—much less prepares for the startling thought that this might be the origin of the expected Messiah. There were, in fact, no texts and traditions ready at hand for such a theological task. Matthew had to create out of fragments easily misunderstood, and one of these is Isa. 7.14.

The virgin betrothed and seduced or raped is, then, in the great Matthean paradox, the virgin who conceives and bears the child they will call Emmanuel. His origin is ignominious and tragic, but Matthew's point is that his existence is divinely willed; his messiahship was not negated by the way he was conceived. The wording in which the New Testament conception story survives is 'when scrutinized closely, curious and equivocal'.[20] This is due not to the desire to be enigmatic, nor to the stress and strain of presenting a novel notion of divine begetting without human paternity (a virginal conception). It is due rather to something more difficult: the effort to be honest, discreet, and profound, dealing with material that resisted—and still resists—the theologian's art: the siding of God with the outcast, endangered woman and child.

Conclusion

I think, on the basis of a broader analysis, that a pre-gospel illegitimacy tradition is probably grounded in historical memory.[21] Mary's pregnancy in the interim between betrothal and home-taking is historical; as is the insistence of Matthew (and Luke) that Joseph was not the biological father. But I see no way of making even an educated guess about whether the conception was a result of rape or not, or about whether the historical Mary was a victim or a free spirit or something in between. The suspicion of rape or seduction could have served to cover up a conception by consensual sex outside of betrothal.

The pre-gospel development of this tradition presents the theological 'revelation' that the illegitimate Jesus was nevertheless the Son of God and that his mother was blameless and to be protected (by Joseph

20. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 221.

21. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, I (New York: Doubleday, 1991), Chapter 6, especially on the criteria of embarrassment, discontinuity, multiple attestation, and the Palestinian environment.

and by the Spirit). Who in the first century CE would have been capable of making such a statement? The explicit theological-Christological interpretation, linking the begetting of Jesus with the Holy Spirit and predicting the child's future greatness may have come from an early Christian prophet, perhaps a member of a charismatic circle acquainted with the use of Spirit terminology to express divine sonship (see Gal. 4.6, 20; Rom. 8.15; and Jn 3.5-6) and to express the accomplishments of Jesus' relationship with God in his resurrection and baptism. The actual speaking contexts are lost to us.

Women would have had a special interest in and understanding of the early tradition about Jesus' conception. 'Oral transmission is controlled by the law of social identification', with traditions being passed down by those whose existence the tradition verifies and whose social needs it meets, those to whom the tradition is true to life or true to hope, even if, in the wider, male-dominated society, it is socially unacceptable and subversive.[22] We would reasonably expect that some of the women of influence in the early church made significant contributions to the oral and perhaps the written tradition and were among the anonymous shapers and framers of the Jesus story. The illegitimacy tradition may be one such contribution: women may have been involved in its creation and in attempting to ensure that it was not forgotten or totally distorted.

In this interpretation of Matthew 1, God 'acts' in a radically new way, outside the patriarchal norm but within the natural event of human conception. The telling in Matthew, however, is androcentric, primarily about and for males; it does not confront the causes or structures of oppression. It is not the story of the mother of Jesus; interest in Mary as a person is minimal. By linking her story, however, with those of the four women listed in the genealogy, Matthew implies that salvation history is not essentially a male enterprise. We can carry that implication further to challenge our deepest prejudices and presuppositions, by breaking the silence of the Silent Night.

22. Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 24-25.

6

A Cancelled Father: Historicity and the New Testament*

Introduction

Historiography has always been a central concern of feminist scholarship. It is guided, however, by its own distinct orientation. Writes Karen King:

> Feminist critical reconstruction of the past aims to present a more accurate and complete accounting of the past at the forks where historical accuracy meets equity and justice. Although ostensibly about the 'past', history is always made in the present, is always reliant upon what evidence exists in the present.[1]

This evidence which exists in the present is, I propose, shaped by two things. First, it is shaped by social and political forces that determine which questions are raised, govern the formation and reception of 'truth statements', and monitor who gets to speak and who evaluates what is spoken. Second, and standing in some tension with the first, it is shaped by our engagement with struggles in our present world, which can enable us to see the struggles that are present both in and beneath the texts, struggles that are visible only from the particular angle of where one sits. For feminist scholars, writes social scientist Karen Fields, the angle of their vision leads them 'to seek truth emancipated from etiquettes of gender dichotomy, from chauvinistic seeing without noticing, and from power prerogatives of veiling, silencing, and outright exclusion'.[2] The result is that feminist scholarship changes

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1. Karen L. King, 'The Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)', in *Searching the Scriptures*. II. *A Feminist Commentary* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad), pp. 601-34 (601).

2. Karen Fields, in her preface to Nancy B. Jay, *Throughout your Generations Forever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xvi.

the map of human history by bringing women back in or revealing them to have always been present, allowing silent voices to speak.

Feminist scholars recognize that interpretation is always situated. For this reason, they insist on discussion of the scholar's own experience and assumptions. We aim at a reading that self-consciously reflects on one's gender, race, social location, and commitments—and on how these affect interpretation. I have tried to show elsewhere how 'reading as a woman' influences my approach to the infancy narratives. I cannot, unfortunately, point you to a reading by one who reads these narratives self-consciously 'as a man'. Nonetheless, it is most important that men 'examine various masculinities embodied in and/or created by the New Testament and readers, including ecclesiastical and academic interpretive communities'.[3]

For me, reading as a woman means reading with feminist consciousness. Gerda Lerner has described that consciousness as the awareness by women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural; but is societally determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternative vision of societal organizations in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination. Many important feminist assumptions are relevant to an examination of the New Testament infancy narratives. I assume, for example, with Lerner, that 'as long as patriarchy existed there must have been women who thought in opposition to it'. I assume also that most of this thinking is lost forever, but it is possible that shards of feminist consciousness may be embedded in the texts we deal with pointing to women's participation in the history we construct. If there was any egalitarian moment or ideal in the Jesus movement—and I think with many others that there was—we would expect that this 'alternative vision' left some mark on the New Testament texts. One such shard I have suggested is a sort of proto-non-patriarchal interpretation of the conception of Jesus. On the basis of this we might make some guesses about history—no more than that, but no less.

Three aspects of my own experience are most relevant to my discussion of these issues. First, my thirteen years living in one of Detroit's most burnt-out desolate neighborhoods. The women and the children

3. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, 'Literary-Critical Methods', in *Searching the Scriptures*. I. *A Feminist Introduction* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 241-54 (251).

and the absent fathers of that neighborhood were part of the community within which I wrote *The Illegitimacy of* Jesus. One conversation with a six-year old stuck in my: mind, as an example of something women must have said through the centuries. When the child asked his mother about the father he had never known; she replied (he said), 'God will just have to be your father' (cf. Mt. 23.9, 'Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven'). Here is quite a different motivation for God-talk than the one we think lies behind language of divine begetting of heroes in antiquity. There the motivation seems to be to explain the source of their great power and accomplishments and destinies.

The second context of my discussion worth mentioning here is my background as a Roman Catholic, and experience of the cult of the Virgin Mother, with both its negative and positive effects on women. I became interested in the source texts of this powerful image, and in subjecting it to some sort of gender analysis.

The third is my experience of being attacked, even vilified for this work. I have written elsewhere of the hate mail and phone calls, financial threats to my university, ecclesiastical and academic sword-rattling, the setting fire to my car. The literary critic Annette Kolodny has included my experience in her article, 'Paying the Price of Anti-Feminist Intellectual Harassment', an MLA study of this phenomenon in faculty and administration ranks. The price is high, and the harassment is part of the context of late-twentieth-century scholarship that affects all of us. I accepted the invitation to address the Jesus Seminar because of my interest in this question of the paternity of Jesus, and because I thought of the Seminar as a reasonably safe place where the question could be discussed without hostility. Nonetheless, I experienced sleeplessness, recalling that the Seminar is widely reported on, and sometimes with what looks like careless flamboyance. I hoped that my participation here would not result in a time of further attack and stress. But not to have accepted the invitation would have meant that I accepted being silenced on this subject. I do not.

Ground Work

Let me outline some basic issues to help clear the ground for discussion of the texts. A central concern is whether or not it is possible for any of us to entertain seriously the question: Was Jesus historically, biologically conceived virginally (that is, without male participation in the conception)? Responses to R.E. Brown's work, the hate mail

that I received, letters to the editor of *Bible Review*, and other objections to even approaching these texts critically show us that it is indeed possible for some—even many—twentieth-century Christians to hold that to have been the case. When Brown judges that the issue cannot be proved or disproved historically, his unstated assumption seems to be that virginal conception is a historical possibility. But the only scholar I ever heard actually say he believed in it was Reginald H. Fuller. I think it is important to ask why so many people consider the virginal conception of Jesus historical, to try to understand the vehemence and heat with which this belief is often held (What is at stake here? What is deemed lost if belief in the virginal conception is lost?); to respect and to articulate why we can or cannot think of it as historical possibility.

As for me, I cannot. This aspect of 'the miraculous', understood not as suspension of natural forces or causes, but as forces and causes unknown to us, differs greatly from other aspects. Unlike miraculous healings, virginal conception is held by Christians who believe in it to be unique. As a cancer survivor, I can accept the possibility that unexplained remissions and healings occur, that they may be linked in some way to psychological states and to relational interactions, even to individuals who possess certain unusual powers. And I can believe that the power-for-good called God is in some way tapped. I have no such entrée into the notion of a virginal conception.

Unlike belief in the resurrection of Jesus, which draws on human desires in the face of death, belief in the virginal conception draws on no depths of human need that I as a woman have or can imagine, except perhaps (when the idea has been subjected to the fancy footwork of thoroughgoing Dalyesque reinterpretation) on the female fantasy of parthenogenic creation, and most importantly the need for a Goddess. At its root, I find the notion of a virginal conception—in spite of official denials—an expression of the belief in God as male and the male as God, woman as receptacle, and Jesus as nonhuman. The very idea is contradicted by my experience of myself and of God. I also do not see how it is compatible with a positive view of sexuality. Yet I am not just talking biology here; belief in a virginal conception as historical, or even a historical possibility, seems to me to require the adoption of a wholly male and wholly sexist point of view as reality. As a consequence, I have no interest in a virginal conception being historical, no need to defend or fear a church that thinks of it as such, and great difficulty in even asking about its historicity.

I do agree with Brown and others that the New Testament infancy narratives, and later formal statements and explanation of virginal conception, are unlike these stories of the conceptions of heroes. The latter involve explicit or implicit metaphors (snakes, rain, thunderbolts) for sexual intercourse, while the former do not. At the same time, the belief in a virginal conception of Jesus, Son of God, does share with those other stories the idea of a divine father replacing or cancelling a human father (even taking into account the role of the Holy Spirit). The idea of a male god impregnating a human female may not be the root or source of the idea of virginal conception, but I think this idea—though restrained by the biblical reluctance to imagine God as sexually active—influences the (mis)reading of the New Testament narratives as being about a virginal conception.

Compare my remarks with those of John Meier in *A Marginal Jew*. He thinks that the New Testament texts are indeed about a virginal conception, but that the precise origins of the tradition remain obscure from a historical point of view. 'How far back the tradition…goes and what its precise origin was is no longer ascertainable by the historian'.[4] The truth of the claim—is he reading it here as a biological claim and not as a theologoumenon?—that Jesus was virginally conceived by the Holy Spirit, which was hardly verifiable even when Jesus appeared on the public stage as an adult, is a fortiori not open to verification today. Taken by itself, historical-critical research simply does not have the sources and tools available to reach a final decision on the historicity of the virginal conception as narrated by Matthew and Luke.

Do we have the sources and tools available for a penultimate or provisional decision? For an opinion? An educated guess? Acceptance or rejection of the doctrine Meier thinks will largely be made on the basis of one's philosophical views about the miraculous (e.g. do miracles take place?), one's theological views (e.g. whether or not God has acted in this particular miracle) and on the basis of the weight one gives to later Church teaching. For him these important questions go beyond the realm of history proper. That his own 'reserved position' is dictated by the limitations of historical-critical research and not predetermined by Catholic confessional concerns, Meier says is indicated by the fact that some Catholic scholars do not agree with him. He sets himself the task of prescinding from, but not denying,

4. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. I. *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 221.

Church teaching. To prescind: to abstract, withdraw from consideration, detach, and separate from, to withdraw attention from, leave out of consideration. He does not, therefore, have to lay out his philosophical, theological, or ecclesiastical presuppositions. What is missing here in Meier's prescinding is any gender analysis.

One question that I will not be able to put aside is whether or not the New Testament narratives present a virginal conception. I have argued that they do not, that this belief is later (second century CE), built on a reaction against the tradition about the illegitimacy of Jesus, which I find 'in' the New Testament narratives. As Troost puts it:

> Whatever is claimed to be 'in' the text is always a reader's construct. Doubtless there are textual elements that enable a certain interpretation. But it depends on your point of departure which textual elements you select to bear on your interpretation, meanwhile probably neglecting other elements.[5]

It depends also, as Stanley Fish has taught us, on your interpretive community, as well as on the interpretive community or communities in which the text was developed. My interpretation is rooted primarily in the Gospel of Matthew, specifically (a) the function of the four women in the genealogy; (b) the meaning of the phrase 'begotten of the Holy Spirit'; and (c) the emphasis on Joseph as *not* the biological father. The absence in the shattered genealogical pattern (Mt. 1.16) of a named biological father (which does not mean he does not exist) and the so-called theological passives in vv. 16, 20, do not add up to a miraculous conception. The verb *gennaō* cannot bear that weight. 'Begotten through the Holy Spirit' was not at all a current expression for designating a miraculous conception. The relevant Jewish texts that employ the motif of divine begetting stress either (a) that God's power is the ultimate source of human life and generation, or (b) election to special status, promise, and obligation. It is in the latter sense that New Testament authors refer to Isaac as 'begotten according to the Spirit' (Gal. 4.29), and to Christians begotten by the Spirit or by God (Jn 1.12-13; 3.3-8; 1 Jn 2.29; 3.9; 4.7; 5.14, 8). There is no context in Jewish literature that would lead one to conclude that since Jesus was God's son, he had no human father. In the case of Luke, I am more willing to consider that the author is constructing a Jesus who aligns with the hero image of Mediterranean antiquity. Even in Luke,

5. Arie Troost, 'Using the Word in Luke 1–2' (paper presented at the Colloquium biblicum lovaniense, 1992).

however, I see (as did Fitzmyer in his first treatment of the subject) that the narrative can be read as describing a normal human conception, with Joseph only the 'supposed' father of Jesus (Lk. 3.23). Consequently, I read the birth narratives to be about a conception that took place between the betrothal and the home-taking, at which point Joseph's acceptance of Mary and the child she was carrying 'legitimated' Jesus.

Even if the New Testament narratives do present a virginal conception, this can be understood as a theologoumenon: that is, a theological insight narrated as a historical event here, a theological concept transformed into a biological claim, if interpreted literally. From this angle too we are brought to discussion of the human paternity of Jesus.

Jesus' Paternity

Joseph as Biological Father

Was Jesus the son of Joseph, or the son of an unnamed man? Was he legitimate or illegitimate or legitimated? Further, can anything be uncovered about the circumstances of his conception?

Both infancy narratives, in spite of the fact that they trace their genealogies through Joseph, say in their different ways that Joseph is not the father of Jesus: Matthew by his presentation of the dilemma of Joseph, Luke by his remark in the genealogy at 3.23. Why this denial?

(a) Those who read the texts as being about a virginal conception answer simply that substituting God for Joseph signals the importance of Jesus. Joseph may have been the biological father, but his paternity is cancelled out or erased by the theological metaphor of the paternity of God. My objection is that biblical and post-biblical Jewish thinking about or symbolizing of divine paternity did not involve such erasure. I do not find it in Philo, or in the Septuagint, or in the Apocrypha. Philo's allegorical statements about the patriarchs (who represent certain virtues), as begotten by God or conceived by 'virgin mothers' (who also represent virtues), are not evidence of a Hellenistic Jewish notion of virginal conception (available to become a theologoumenon), nor do they exert an influence (direct or indirect) on the New Testament narratives. Philo's stress on virginity is linked to his dualistic anthropology and his open hostility toward women, traits—like allegory—that do not appear in the New Testament narratives. It is widely agreed that there is no evidence that *parthenos* in Isa. 7.14 LXX or that the Hebrew *'almâ* behind it referred to a biological virgin miraculously conceiving. *Parthenos* in the Septuagint referred to

a young girl of marriageable age, usually but not always a biological virgin. One exception is found in the Apocrypha in *2 Enoch* (Slavonic Enoch). Here, Melchizedek is said to have been created by 'the word' of God, without participation of his mother's husband. But this seems to me to signal the appearance of a superhuman, perhaps angelic being, not the birth of a real human being. One may respond: well, that is what is being signaled in the Matthean text. I do not think so.

Luise Schottroff makes the interesting suggestion that Joseph is only cancelled out this one time. Neither Matthew nor Luke sees a contrast between the virgin Mary and the wife of Joseph, the mother of Joseph's children (see Lk. 8.19-21; Mt. 13.55-57). Neither presents Mary's virginity as a kind of purity in contrast to impure sexuality. Her virginal conception of Jesus is not negatively compared to and does not rule out her normal conception of other children by Joseph. I do not know whether Schottroff thinks of Joseph as the historical, biological father of Jesus. She speaks of the New Testament Jesus as 'a child without bodily father, a child not procreated', but created by the Spirit.

(b) Another question concerning the paternity of Joseph is, if Joseph was the biological father of Jesus, why is the pregnancy set in the betrothal period? Those who read the New Testament texts as being about a virginal conception might answer that this timing heightens the miraculous nature, since Mary is a virgin, unlike the married Sopanim in *2 Enoch* 71. Is it more fabulous for a virgin to conceive than for a fully married woman? Or harder to claim miraculous conception for a married woman? Further, this reasoning might proceed, better to have it in the betrothal period than before, since Mary's married status was a solid part of the pre-gospel tradition, and it would be more difficult to think of any man becoming betrothed to a pregnant woman or a woman with a child. Perhaps. But the setting in the betrothal period creates a stronger whiff of scandal than seems necessary or desirable. If scandal was part of the pre-gospel tradition, it may have been grounded in a noticeably early birth. Many scholars think that an early birth was a catalyst for the creation of the notion of a virginal conception. This could result from sexual relations between Joseph and Mary during the betrothal period (probably not allowed in the Galilee, but allowed in Judea). Or it could result from relations between Mary and some other man.

I stress this issue of the betrothal period because that is the clue to an allusion to Deut. 22.23-27, the law concerning the seduction or rape of a betrothed girl. The term 'seduction' (considered an act of

infidelity) is used in discussions of Deut. 22.23-27, with the implication that a betrothed virgin, normally very young, would have been partly victimized by her partner, although the act would still qualify as adultery. Notice that the law seems to imply incorrectly that rape is a violent form of seduction. Both situations covered in this law could amount to what today would be called rape. No Hebrew Bible text clearly envisages a situation in which it is discovered during the betrothal period that the girl was not 'seduced' but willingly had intercourse with someone other than her fiancé. Most commentators presume that Matthew indicates a situation in which Mary is suspected of having consented to sexual intercourse. I myself read the allusion to Deut. 22.23-27 as an essential clue to what I regard as the only other historical alternative to the paternity of Joseph: the paternity of some other man. Joseph's paternity is denied in Matthew and Luke because it was known in some circles that he was not the biological father of Jesus. (Contrast Lk. 4.22; Jn 1.45; 6.42, where Jesus is referred to as Joseph's son; also references to Jesus being born of the 'seed' of David in Rom. 1.3-4; 2 Tim. 2.8.) That knowledge was perhaps being used to smear Jesus and his movement, to weaken his credibility as a religious leader. The New Testament texts, and the tradition behind them, agree that Joseph was not the father, but not—as I read it—that illegitimacy discredits Jesus.

Someone Other than Joseph as Jesus' Biological Father

What are the objections to the historical possibility of the illegitimacy of Jesus, to the very idea? What are the assumptions and presuppositions behind the objections? Some have argued that such a proposal is trendy and therefore untrue; that it is theologically superficial and therefore untrue; that it is a 'self-serving' reading of the texts—by which I suppose is meant that it somehow serves or tries to serve the cause of women, as feminist readings are wont to do. All of this is beside the point, since something might well be historical reality, but trendy, superficial from someone's standpoint, and serve the cause of women. R.E. Brown argues that my claim 'that a rapist was Jesus' true father'—this is not my claim, by the way, as I will explain below—'destroys the theological identity of Jesus intended by Mt. 1.18-25. Jesus is not the son of an unknown. He is truly Son of God…' But why could Jesus not be Son of God and son of an unknown—or even son of a nobody?

The tradition and texts, read as presenting a virginal conception, have been considered a rebuttal of the 'slur' that Jesus was illegitimate. I read them, however, as a response to the truth of the illegitimacy charge. Virgil Elizotido (in a remark I put in a footnote in *Illegitimacy*, but which has haunted me since) gives some insight into the murky process of getting from illegitimacy to virginal conception, whether we think of this as a New Testament or a post-New Testament process. He attempts to show that the appearance in the twentieth century of the Virgin of Guadalupe counters sexual oppression:

> In this case, virginity is in opposition to the scandal and shame of violated womanhood. She was pure and unsoiled because she had not been touched by the raping hands of the conquistador. In her, Mexican womanhood is restored to its original dignity. Equally is the Mexican male liberated, for no longer will he have to suffer the castrating effects of seeing his beloved women violated and not being able to do anything about it. What has been prostituted and abused by the conquistador is now virginized by God. In this case, virginity is the complete rehabilitation of abused personhood… [The Virgin Mother of Tepeyac] counters the insulting and dehumanizing effects of the rape and abuse of oppressed women and the destructive shame it equally casts, upon its men. Even if poor women are forced into prostitution by the structures of oppression, they are kept virginally pure by the all-protecting Virgin Mother.[6]

I am not surprised that I have not been able to find a similarly dissociative explanation by an abused woman. Male shame and male feelings of being castrated, helpless and violated dominate Elizondo's explanation.

Synthesis

Although Deut. 22.23-27 is alluded to in both Matthew's and Luke's narratives, I see no way of making even an educated guess about whether the conception of Jesus was the result of rape or not. I must not have made this point clearly enough in *Illegitimacy*, because the work is often summarized as making the claim that Jesus was conceived as the result of a rape.

This is—let me repeat—not my claim. I think that it is probably historical that Jesus was conceived illegitimately, and I claim (with many other scholars) that the law of Deut. 22.23-26 is alluded to in

6. Virgil Elizondo, 'Mary and the Poor: A Model of Evangelising Ecumenism', in *Mary in the Churches* (ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Motlmann; New York: Seabury Press, 1983), pp. 59-65.

both narratives. But I do not claim that the subtext from Deuteronomy is sufficient historical evidence of a historical rape. It is interesting to me how the very word 'rape' in this context of the origin of Jesus and the motherhood of Mary causes fur to fly. Let me quote myself here:

> The situation drawn from the tradition and described in the narratives, of Mary conceiving in the interim between betrothal and home-taking, is historically correct… The insistence of both the evangelists that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father should also be understood as insistence on historical fact.
>
> Can we draw any conclusions about how the conception occurred? The allusions to Deut. 22.23-27 in the New Testament narratives are faint pointers to an answer; in the pre-gospel tradition clearer reference may have been made to Mary's seduction or rape. Do these allusions pertain to an historical occurrence? Why else would they be present? It appears that the evangelists and framers of the tradition before them found the allusions to Deuteronomy helpful in defending Mary against a charge or rumor that she freely chose a sexual partner other than the man to whom she was betrothed… [B]oth New Testament narratives, read through the lens of this law in Deuteronomy, do not cast blame on Mary; they force us to recognize that illegitimacy does not necessarily imply sin on the woman's part, even from a patriarchal standpoint and within the confines of a patriarchal culture. But the possibility cannot be ruled out that the historical truth on this point may be found in the charge or rumor (of consensual sex, of Mary's free choice in this matter), and not in the pre-gospel tradition and New Testament narratives… The question must remain an open one historically. New Testament criticism cannot take us behind the reconstructed pre-gospel tradition here.
>
> There may have been an irregularity about the birth of Jesus, in that he was born noticeably early after his parents came to live together. Public knowledge of early birth, however, would not have been enough to make public the circumstances of Jesus' conception or to ground a rumor or charge of illegitimacy. On the one hand, premature births surely occurred fairly frequently in antiquity (even if many babies so born did not survive), and these births were surely quickly forgotten.
>
> On the other hand, if the birth was too early to be regarded as premature, the normal assumption of outsiders would be that conception occurred because of sexual intercourse between Mary and Joseph during the time of their betrothal. This would not be scandalous behavior, especially since the rules governing intercourse during betrothal were apparently not uniform geographically and throughout the first century CE. Unless there was some public repudiation of the child by Joseph (which is highly unlikely, since Jesus is called his son in traditions from the ministry), it is difficult to think of early birth being the basis for later scandal and for such significant defensive writings as the gospels (and the pre-gospel tradition) may be. Seduction or rape or consensual sex would be known only if one of the three parties intimately involved (Mary, Joseph or the unnamed man) told

> of it, or if it was witnessed [then as now]. In the absence of a trial or hearing, and in the absence of any punishment or repudiation, suspicion of illegitimacy—whether sincere or prompted by the desire to discredit Jesus—could thrive only on the admission of someone involved.[7]

The pre-gospel tradition did not break with the theological notion that divine begetting enables, presupposes, does not eliminate human paternity. But the pre-gospel tradition did break with an important sociological prejudice: that of accounting a child conceived illegitimately as inferior, doomed, *cursed* (see Sir. 23.22-26; Wis. 3.16-19; 4.3-6, and references in rabbinic sources to illegitimate children called 'the excrement of the community'). This break, this defiance of social expectations, is illustrated by the historical action of Joseph, who accepted the child into his family.

Support for the Illegitimacy of Jesus

For those for whom the illegitimacy of Jesus is not an unthinkable idea, what supports the opinion that it is? It is interesting to apply the old methods here. It is odd that the infancy narratives are often dismissed as myth and legend or fiction with little or no historical content, even though the ordinary methods of historical criticism can be applied to them, and even though they raise questions—like this one—that call for historical analysis.

The Criterion of Multiple Attestation

Based on common elements in Matthew 1 and Luke 1, as I read them, the outlines of a pre-gospel, probably oral tradition can be constructed. The agreements between Matthew and Luke push us back behind these Gospels. Both writers agree that Joseph was not the father of Jesus, that the pregnancy occurred during the betrothal period, and both use phrases that do not—or need not—refer to miraculous conception, but rather to God's special acceptance of the child and mother. Both stories can be read as concerning a conception that occurred in the normal human way. There are traces also in both texts, stronger in the Matthean narrative, that Deut. 22.23-27 is alluded to. In addition, Mk 6.3, Jn 8.41, and perhaps *Gos. Thom.* 105 corroborate the existence of a charge of illegitimacy known in the pre-gospel period. Matthew and Luke, as I see it, do not deny the charge

7. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 151-53.

but offer theological interpretations. Mark and John seem to me to say the charge does not matter. *Acts of Philip* 2.3 (originating in the second century CE), the possible use in Origen's *Against Celsus* of a Jewish source from the second century, and some references in rabbinic literature repeat the charge, and may indicate that some read or hear Matthew (and Luke?) as being about an illegitimate conception.

Palestinian Environment

Analysis of the betrothal customs in the Galilee and in Judea, and of contemporary applications and implications of the law recorded in Deuteronomy 22, suggest that the story Matthew imagines (and Luke avoids?), with Joseph in a dilemma but finally completing the marriage, is at home in a Palestinian setting. Some Jewish laymen may have regarded themselves as required to divorce a raped wife, but it is more likely that some laymen regarded themselves as allowed to divorce her. The choice probably depended on a man's religious, sexual, and human sensitivities. For the convicted adulteress, however, divorce was most likely, if not obligatory. A quiet divorce was also an option for a man wishing to spare himself (and his wife) the public disgrace of a hearing. The option of a completed marriage and acceptance or adoption of the child with whom the betrothed woman was pregnant is the outcome of the story Matthew tells. It is the kindest and most humane possibility, and probably the rarest and most unexpected.

The Criterion of Embarrassment

Certainly Jesus' illegitimate conception would have embarrassed or created difficulty for segments of the early church, as Mark 6 and John 8 already show. We cannot imagine the church inventing such a potentially damaging tradition. Nor did it develop it. Instead we see the increasing denial of any biologically normal conception in such texts as the *Protoevangelium of James*. The annunciation scene in Luke, for example, is supplemented by questions of Mary to the angel. She is made to ask, 'Will I conceive by the Lord, the living God, as every woman gives birth?' The angel answers this question (which obviously was being debated) directly and clearly: 'Not that way, Mary. For a power of God will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called son of the Most High.' In the Armenian manuscript edited by Conybeare, over thirty objections on Mary's part

and Gabriel's responses are added to this scene, which ends with conception taking place through Mary's 'ear of hearing within'. Joseph's paternity is ruled out, and so is that of any other man.

The Criterion of Discontinuity

There is no evidence that illegitimacy (any more than crucifixion) was part of a profile of an expected religious leader within the Judaisms of the period, or that it was played up by early Christians. Then as now, the human sensibilities of patriarchal societies, the sensibilities of those—by and large—who have made the rules and written the texts and commentaries and theologies, find this an unacceptable, inappropriate origin. The illegitimacy tradition, I suggest, was so discontinuous and so embarrassing that it became nearly invisible.

The Criterion of Rejection and Execution

'A Jesus whose words and deeds would not alienate people, especially powerful people, is not the historical Jesus'.[8] We have evidence of this alienation that is linked to his very being, his origin (Mk 6.3; Jn 8.41).

A Credible Theory

Can a credible theory be sketched concerning the transmission of the pre-gospel illegitimacy tradition? I think so. Stemming originally from the family circle of Jesus, the basis of the tradition may have been simply the report that Jesus was illegitimately conceived. Perhaps also from family circles comes an ancient affirmation that the child was begotten of a spirit that was holy, not unholy, and that the mother was blameless. The further pre-gospel interpretation of the illegitimacy may not stem from the family, since it is difficult to reconcile with evidence that the family of Jesus was not among his followers during his ministry, and since there is no evidence of prophetic-type activity in the family. That tradition presents the theological 'revelation' that the illegitimate Jesus is nevertheless Son of God, destined for greatness, and his mother protected—by Joseph, by the Spirit. Who in New Testament times would be capable of making such a statement about an endangered woman and child? We can guess that the explicit word may have come from an early Christian prophet, perhaps a member of a charismatic circle acquainted with the use of Spirit terminology to

8. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, I, p. 177.

express divine sonship (see Gal. 4.6, 29; Rom. 8.15; Jn 3.5-6), and to express the accomplishment of Jesus' relationship with God in his resurrection and baptism. The actual speaking contexts are lost to us.

Women—some women—would have had a special interest in and understanding of the early tradition about Jesus' conception. 'Oral transmission', according to Kelber, 'is controlled by the law of social identification', with traditions passed down by those whose existence the tradition verifies and whose social needs it meets, by those to whom the tradition is true to life or true to hope, even if, in the wider male-dominated society, it is socially unacceptable and subversive. We would reasonably expect that some of the women of influence in the early church made significant contributions to the oral and perhaps the written tradition, and were among the anonymous shapers and framers of the Jesus story. The illegitimacy tradition may be one such contribution: women may have been involved in its creation, and in attempting to assure it was not forgotten or totally distorted.

If the story of how and when Jesus was conceived was family tradition, it is unlikely it would have been communicated to many. Rather, it would naturally have been kept secret. But leakage and rumor were possible, especially in the hometown, and it is easy to imagine such a rumor spreading during the ministry and afterwards, on the lips of those—perhaps at first family members—who did not accept either the claims Jesus made or those his followers made for him. Early Christian theologizing, on the basis of the core of that story and to counter rumor, produced the traditions used by Matthew and Luke. Given the nature of the case, it is not surprising that the tradition does not appear in any of the so-called kerygmatic passages of the New Testament.

The appearance of the tradition, with its theological and Christological components, in the Gospels of the 80s does not indicate the lateness of the tradition. Because of its traumatic nature and its potential damage to the Jesus movement, and I think because of its faith demand, the tradition was a difficult one to communicate. Once communicated, however hesitantly, it was bound to cause strong audience reactions. Misunderstandings, ridicule, rejection, and slander surely followed in its wake. In the post-gospel Christian communities (or perhaps at the gospel stage, in Luke) the tradition ceased to overcome the social threshold to communal reception. The female voice emanating from the text was muted or gagged, the perspective of feminist consciousness on systems of honor and shame, blame and worth, was lost. Reference to rape or seduction, much less to willing

extra-marital sexual activity, is met perennially with the suspicion or certainty that the woman involved is to blame, and illegitimacy still often connotes a child's inferiority or worthlessness, if not evil. The story of the conception of Jesus no longer registered, no longer functioned, as a critique of these values. Many modern scholars who discuss this tradition speak of it as repulsive, repugnant, crazy, and absurd, provocative, an unthinkable alternative to virginal conception, something usually not mentioned in polite company or in polite books. Such language betrays a strong, sometimes vehement, reaction against the tradition; it can effectively deny a hearing to the charge of illegitimacy and may mirror the reaction of some early Christians.

New Testament evangelists also tame or blunt the tradition of Jesus' illegitimacy, making it hard for the reader to imagine the grief and danger of the original historical circumstances. If in writing they hoped to still the rumors and end the dialogue over this issue, they failed; the oral tradition continued to have lives of its own. And the New Testament texts themselves continue to be open to a variety of interpretations, far beyond the control of their authors.

A final argument for the historicity of the illegitimacy tradition concerns the help and insight it might offer in constructing a credible understanding of the historical Jesus. An illegitimate conception for Jesus of Nazareth could be considered by some as more 'fitting' an origin for the Son of God who is believed to be in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, with the endangered woman and the endangered child, and who is destined for death by execution as a political criminal. Andries van Aarde has seen a connection between 'the fatherless Jesus' (healed of this stigma) and his ministry of healing/forgiving among 'sinners', 'children and other nobodies in his society', 'the expendables'.[9] I think this is a promising direction for research. Such theological, ethical, or literary 'fittingness', however, is irrelevant to the historian.

Conclusion

I want to end where I began with some comments about feminist scholarship. Like other feminist works, especially since the mid- to late 1980s, my study is interested in trying to hear women's traditions or 'voices' in male-centered, male-authored texts. It regards these texts

9. Andries G. Van Aarde, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), p. 135.

with suspicion; not as 'sacred' or as 'canon', but as of ambiguous value—a mixed bag of sources that have the potential to promote health and hurt, power for liberation and for oppression. Traditional readings of the birth narratives may challenge some values of the patriarchal mindset, but they offer no explicit challenges to the structures of patriarchy, and no escape from the sexism that is embedded in the biblical text. My reading, like that of other feminist works, tries to read the silences and gaps in the texts, recognizing that most of women's history and past flashes of feminist insight are lost forever. Yet by focusing on the position and role of women in societies associated with the biblical texts, on moments (conception, marriage, birth, rape, suspicion of rape, endangerment of children, male violence) which provide glimpses of gender relations in those societies, it attempts to gain a potentially fuller, truer version of history. The goal of such feminist scholarship in moving beyond traditional readings, in re-visioning the past, is the hope of creating a richer, more human, present and future for all of us.

Ancient Faces

Mummy portraits exhibit at the British Museum, 1997

A beautiful black woman, well dressed, perhaps Ethiopian,
Stands stock still
To the side of a crowd of shoppers
in Oxford Street.

One hand is at her breast
giving the international signal
for appalling, inexpressible
grief.

Her head is inclined just so
as portraits of the dead tip forward
on mummy cases stood on end,
ancient faces, from Roman Egypt
looking at our waists, at the air between us.

Two blond women walking ahead of me
notice her, as I do.
We three turn separately with alarm
as the crowd eddies around us

and then in recognition
that this is grief beyond help
we are borne on.

Part III

Mary Magdalene in the Popular Imagination: A Feminist Response

Gracie

It all happened suddenly. Gracie's arthritis grew worse. Never one to suffer in silence, she would bellow out the front window for help if no help was there. Delores tried to be there, but she had a job; Sally came back to live with Gracie and the decision was made to sell to the huge Jehovah's Witness, on a land contract. Gracie lived first with retired relatives in the Carolinas, but they went to bed at 9 pm and that left her tearing her hair out with loneliness; likewise the relatives in Windsor who had a little apartment for her. Finally she and Sally got the house attached to the restaurant on Howard Road. It had a white plastic horse in the yard (the Youngs were horse people). She settled in.

The rest of us in the pink houses fled when the Jehovah Witness rented to people with huge Dobermans and lots of garbage and fire setting and noise. With Carolyn's help I quickly found a house in the University District, a square mile or so of middle-class houses north of Six Mile, near my work. I visited Gracie regularly when I went to Windsor to ride my horse and other times and occasions when we would celebrate birthdays at the restaurant, and she would give her homilies. Sally and I took her to the barn in a wheelchair: she looked up at Rapp and said, 'How d' y' think I can get up there?' Not 'do you' but 'how'.

Trying to Learn

for Anita Hill

Ahmed and I are climbing the cliffs of Qumran.
He is trying to figure out how to keep grabbing my crotch.

(Dumb tourist with her camera
I can lead her anywhere
catch her pussy jumping off the high ledges,
lift her pussy up onto those)

And I am trying to see,
to imagine how they—unh—hid the Dead Sea Scrolls.
I am trying to learn
while protecting myself.

He could throw me down here
in tiny Cave 4 on the marl terrace
    found by—unh—Taamire Bedouin 1952 richest ms—no—deposit
    mention—whuh—of Melkiersha, Books of Enoch, Liturgical Curses
He could, if he thinks of it,
if he thinks there's time. Cutitout

'And your husband and you,
how often, the sex?'
Once a day, all day everyday.
'Where is he, your husband?'
In America, no no but coming here coming soon coming today.
    She will never re[st] from wh[orin]g,
    her eyes glance hither and thither,
    she lifts her eyelids naughtily
    to stare at the virtuous man and join him,
    and at an important man to trip him up,
    at upright men to pervert their way (4Q184 1.13-14)

And at the Al Azhar mosque in Cairo
    But—no no—by Gawhar as Sekkeli 972
    first school mosque, one of the world's oldest—unh—universities
    Muslim students from all over, three minarets—quit it

climbing up the winding stairs—stop
the guide puts one hand into his gabileyah
and the other up my skirt—no—
I am trying to see this fucking mosque
I am fucking trying to fucking learn.

7

How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore*

In the popular mind, Mary Magdalene represents the repentant sinner, lifted from the depths of whoredom by her romantic love for Jesus—proof that even the lowliest can be saved through repentance and devotion. This image is actively perpetuated in both film and literature.[1] Yet this is a very different picture from the one the Gospels give us. How did this happen? And when? And why?

In all four Gospels the Magdalene participates in Jesus' Galilean ministry, she follows him to Jerusalem, she mourns at his crucifixion, and on the first Easter she goes to his tomb and finds it empty. Except in the Gospel of Luke, she is said to have been sent with a commission to proclaim to the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. According to the accounts in Mt. 28.1-10, Jn 20.14-18, and Mk 16.9 she is the first person to whom the risen Jesus appears.[2] In short, Mary Magdalene is the primary witness to the fundamental data of early Christian faith.[3]

The earliest reference to the Magdalene in Jesus' life comes during his Galilean ministry. In Luke we learn that while traveling with his disciples, Jesus healed some women of evil spirits and infirmities. One of them—the first named—is the Magdalene, from whom Jesus exorcised seven demons:

* This is an edited version of an essay with the same title that originally appeared in *Bible Review* 8/5 (1992), pp. 31-37, 51-52.

1. See the chapter 'Mary Magdalene in the Movies' in this volume.

2. Mark 16.9-20 is viewed by most scholars as a later addition to the Gospel, not written by Mark. It appears in a number of manuscripts and is accepted as canonical in some traditions, although it is printed in smaller type in many translations. Some scholars think 16.9-20 is dependent on the other Gospels and summarizes their narratives of resurrection appearances; other scholars regard it as independent tradition.

3. She is not mentioned in the Pauline corpus, not even in 1 Cor. 15.3-8, which lists those to whom Jesus made post-resurrection appearances.

> [H]e went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. 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, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (Lk. 8.1-3)

Mary is called Magdalene because she is from the town of Magdala, generally identified with the site of Migdal on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She, along with other women, travels with Jesus and the twelve disciples. In the passage from Luke, she and the other women are cast in a subordinate role of service and support to the males in the movement. In Luke (and in Acts) it is the twelve disciples—all men—who are the major witnesses and leaders in the movement.

But does this reflect the actual experience of Jesus' original followers? In the passage from Luke, the women 'provided for them out of their resources'. The Greek verb translated here as 'provided' is *diakoneō*, which means to serve, wait on, or minister to. Although some ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke have the women ministering to 'him' (that is, to Jesus alone), instead of 'them', the canonical text of Lk. 8.3 reads 'them'. In contrast, Mk 15.41 and Mt. 27.55 describe the women, including the Magdalene (who is again named first), as those who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to *him*. That Luke has the women ministering to the disciples is consistent with his general tendency to subordinate the role of women.[4]

Although these women travel with Jesus, none of them is ever given the title of 'disciple' by any of the Gospel writers. Ben Witherington has said that for a woman 'to leave home and travel with a rabbi was not only unheard of, it was scandalous. Even more scandalous was the fact that women, both respectable and not, were among Jesus' traveling companions.'[5] But do we really know this? If it was so scandalous, why did the scandal leave no mark on the traditions?[6]

4. A distinction is made here between the *presence* of women in the text and the *role* of women in the text. There are many women *present* in the Gospel of Luke and Acts; however, they have no significant role in terms of leadership or witness. Their voices are rarely heard.

5. Ben Witherington III, 'On the Road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and Other Disciples—Luke 8, 1-2', *ZNW* 70 (1979), pp. 243-48 (244-45).

6. Jn 4.27 is the only exception, though it has nothing to do with travel. Jesus' disciples find him with the Samaritan woman: 'They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or "Why are you speaking with her?"'

Why was the fact that there were women who traveled with Jesus never explicitly defended in the Gospels? And on what basis does Witherington conclude that some of the women who traveled with Jesus were not 'respectable'? Is it possible that he has been influenced by the popular imagination which has identified Mary Magdalene as a whore?

What kind of service did the women traveling with Jesus provide? Some see it as domestic: shopping, cooking, sewing, serving meals, the work of a traditional wife. However, behind this passage in Lk. 8.1-3 may be a tradition that women were significant figures in the table fellowship and intellectual leadership of the Jesus movement. In the early Christian community, the noun *diakonia* referred to Eucharistic table service and to proclamation of God's word. Others have suggested that these women were wealthy philanthropists or benefactors. Yet it is widely agreed that most members of the earliest Jesus movement were poor. Writing towards the end of the first century, Luke often places wealthy women in support roles (see Acts 13.50; 17.4, 12, 34), but this cannot be accepted as accurate historical memory. In short, these verses in Luke do not give us reliable information about Mary Magdalene's social status or life's work.

At a meeting of scholars where I recently gave a paper on this subject, a professor of New Testament suggested that this passage in Luke proved that the Magdalene was a whore: 'How else could a woman be wealthy?', he said. That women should be regarded as prostitutes simply because they had resources reflects the same kind of mindset we find in those who somehow conclude from Jesus' exorcism of seven demons from the Magdalene that she had been a whore.[7] There is simply no reason to connect this healing with previous prostitution—or immorality, for that matter.

The next time we meet the Magdalene is at the crucifixion in Jerusalem. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all name her as a witness to the crucifixion. In Mark and Matthew we learn that among the 'women looking on from afar' was Mary Magdalene (Mk 15.40; Mt. 27.55-56). Mark also identifies the women present as those 'who when he was in Galilee followed him and ministered to him' (Mk 15.41; compare Mt. 27.55-56). Although Luke does not mention any of the women by name at the crucifixion scene, he does state that 'the women who had

7. Only in Lk. 8.2 is the Magdalene said to have been possessed by seven demons.

followed him from Galilee' were there (Lk. 23.49), and when he names them later in the scene at the tomb (Lk. 24.10), Mary Magdalene is among them. In John, she is standing at the cross with Jesus' mother, among others (Jn 19.35).

The Magdalene watches as Jesus is laid in the tomb (Mk 15.46-47; Mt. 27.59-61; Lk. 23.55). She returns to the tomb on Sunday. The accounts of what happens at the tomb vary in each of the Gospels. In Mark, the women bring spices to anoint Jesus. They see that the stone has been rolled away from the door of the tomb. Entering the tomb, they are amazed to see a young man in a white robe. He tells them that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised and is not there. He instructs the women to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before them to Galilee, where 'you will see him'. The women, however, flee from the tomb, 'for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid' (Mk 16.1-8). Most scholars think that the Gospel of Mark, our earliest Gospel, ended here at v. 8, with the women's silence. They also think that Matthew and Luke then used and edited Mark's Gospel as they wrote their own.

In Matthew, Mary Magdalene goes toward dawn with 'the other Mary' to see the sepulcher. There is no mention of spices as in Mark. There is an earthquake at the tomb, 'for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone'. The angel tells the women to 'go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him'. The women are full of great joy as well as fear, and they run to tell the disciples. As they run, Jesus meets them and tells them again to tell his brothers to go to Galilee where they will see him (Mt. 28.1-10).

In Luke the women come to the tomb bearing spices and find the stone already rolled away; they go into the tomb and are perplexed not to find the body of Jesus. Two men 'in dazzling apparel' ask them why they seek the living among the dead. They remind the women that Jesus told them while he was still in Galilee that 'the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise'. The women remember the words. On their own, they decide to tell the Eleven and others. But the apostles consider their words 'an idle tale' and they do not believe them (Lk. 24.1-11).

In John, the Magdalene comes alone to the tomb early Easter morning. As in Matthew, there is no mention of spices. She finds the stone has been taken away. She runs and tells Simon Peter and 'the

other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved' that 'they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him'. Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb, but find it empty; looking into the tomb they see Jesus' burial linens. They leave, and Mary Magdalene is alone, weeping outside the tomb. She stoops, looks inside the tomb, and sees two angels sitting there. They ask her why she is weeping. She replies, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him'. She turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she does not recognize him. He too asks her why she weeps, and, thinking he is the gardener, she says, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away'. Jesus speaks her name, 'Mary', and she recognizes him. He tells her to tell his brothers, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. She goes and tells the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord' (Jn 20.1-18).

In John, then, the Magdalene is the first to see the risen Lord. The Markan addition shares this view, 'Now when he arose on the first day, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene' (Mk 16.9). In Matthew, she and the other Mary are the first to see him.

So how did this woman who traveled with Jesus in Galilee and was a witness to these epochal events become known as a whore? Nothing in the texts that name her indicates that she had such a past. The most that can be said is that she traveled with Jesus in Galilee where he exorcised demons from her, and that she had resources of her own with which to serve.

It is clear that the text itself does not stigmatize the Magdalene as a whore. The first step in giving her this past lies in interpretation. In early Christian interpretation, women mentioned in several passages became identified with the Magdalene, even though these texts do not explicitly name her as the woman involved. The motif that links these texts together is anointing. The Magdalene, it will be recalled, came to Jesus' tomb on the first Easter with spices to anoint him (Mk 16.1; see also Lk. 24.1). Jesus was, of course, called the Anointed One (*Christos*). So it is perhaps natural that the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' head in Mk 14.3-9 and Mt. 26.6-13 is identified in early tradition as the Magdalene, especially because in these pre-crucifixion passages this anointing is explicitly said to be for Jesus' burial. Adapting this motif of anointing, Lk. 7.36-50 describes a woman 'who was a sinner' anointing Jesus' feet. Jesus tells Simon, 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little'. Here, too, later tradition identifies the woman as the

Magdalene. The identification is made easier because in Jn 12.1-3 a woman named Mary at Lazarus's home in Bethany anoints Jesus' feet (see also Jn 11.2).

Thus, in one of the passages that became associated with Mary Magdalene, there is a woman named Mary; she is therefore assumed (although this Mary is from Bethany) to be the Magdalene. In other passages that involve anointing, no name is given to the woman, but she is nevertheless identified in later tradition as Mary Magdalene. In Luke, the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus is called 'a woman of the city' (Lk. 7.36-50); her sin, it is clearly implied, is sexual. Sexual sin serves to link this passage with two others that in later traditions are sometimes considered to be about Mary Magdalene: the story of an unnamed woman caught in the act of committing adultery (Jn 7.53–8.11) and the story of the Samaritan woman said to have had five husbands and to be living with a man not her husband (Jn 4.8-29).

This conflation of stories from the Gospels produced the beginnings of a 'biography' of this remarkable woman who clearly was more important to the story of Jesus than the Gospel writers explicitly state. The initial motives behind this conflation may have been benign, even creative, but the conflation ended up as a basis for the identification of the Magdalene as a whore. This identification fulfills the desire—or the need—to subordinate the Magdalene, as well as the desire to attach to female sexuality the notions of evil, repentance, and mercy. Marina Warner believes that the later legend of the Magdalene as prostitute was 'brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity, which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh'.[8] The need for a penitent whore-heroine in Christian mythology shaped the understanding of passages like this that did or might (in the Christian imagination) concern her. In the words of Warner, the development of the prostitution legend represents 'Christianity's fear of women, its identification of physical beauty

8. Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 225-32. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has rightly remarked that the post-New Testament distortion of the image of Mary Magdalene signals a deep distortion in the attitudes toward, and in the self-understanding and identity of, the Christian woman and man ('Mary Magdalene: Apostle to the Apostles', *Union Theological Seminary Journal* [April 1975], p. 5; *Der vergessner Partner* [Dusseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1964], pp. 57-59). That distortion calls for precise documentation and correction by historians. See also Pheme Perkins, '"I have seen the Lord" (John 20.18): Women Witnesses to the Resurrection', *Interpretation* 46 (1992), pp. 31-41.

with temptation, and its practice of bodily mortification'.[9] I would add that the legend-making process also reflects a Christian reaction against female power and the authority of this major witness to the crucial data of Christianity, especially the resurrection.

Precisely how early this conflation produced the legend of Mary Magdalene's whoredom we do not know. Origen (c. 185–c. 254 CE) and John Chrysostom (c. 347–407 CE) comment that Mary Magdalene was a wholly unsuitable first witness to Jesus' resurrection. So the legend, or basic aspects of it, may already have been in place at this time. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great gave prestige and authoritative sanction to this conflation in his homilies.[10] The earliest extant text that harmonizes the episodes into a single, concise, and coherent narrative of the Magdalene's 'life' appears to be a tenth-century sermon attributed to Odo of Cluny.[11]

Especially influential was a legend about her last thirty years, supposedly spent in Provence, France. Its fully developed and relatively stable form is that told by Jacobus de Voragine in his immensely popular *Legenda aurea* (*Golden Legend*) in the mid-thirteenth century.[12] In this telling, very little attention is paid to the Magdalene's presence in the passion and resurrection scenes; the emphasis, instead, is on her sin and repentance, and on love. Her story as told here shows that anyone, even the most sinful, can be forgiven. In her life after the ascension of Jesus, the Magdalene is said to have traveled widely, to have undergone many trials, and to have spent her last thirty years in isolation. The ultimate source of this life of solitude is a legend about the prostitute Mary of Egypt, who did penance naked and wrapped in her hair in a desert retreat. By the ninth century this story was blended into that of the Magdalene. In this telling the prostitute has become a recluse; the Magdalene of the Gospels has all but disappeared.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, modern scholarship began to deharmonize the Gospels—instead of trying to make them consistent, scholars began to appreciate their differences and what lay behind those differences. In 1517 a scholar named Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples

9. Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, p. 232.

10. Gregory I, *XL Homiliarum in Evangelia libri duo* 2.25 (Patrologia latina, LXXVI, pp. 1188-96).

11. Odo of Cluny, *In veneratione S. Mariae Magdalenae* (Patrologia latina, CXXXIII, p. 721).

12. Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea* (ed. T. Graesse; Dresden, 1846); English translation: Granger Ryan and Helmut Rippergar, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine* (New York: Longmans, 1941; repr. New York: Arno, 1969), pp. 355-64.

published a critique of the traditional view of Mary Magdalene as repentant whore.[13] Within the next three years, fifteen major treatises were written on the controversy. Lefèvre d'Etaples was censured by the theological faculty of the Sorbonne. His works were placed on the Vatican's *Index librorum prohibitorum* (*List of Prohibited Books*). The controversy over the Magdalene, however, continued to rage for the next 350 years.

Today Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox agree in distinguishing among three separate female Gospel characters: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the unnamed 'sinner' in Luke 7. Thus the Magdalene can no longer be identified as the 'sinner'. The links between the Magdalene and the woman caught in adultery (Jn 7.53–8.11) and between the Magdalene and the Samaritan woman who had five husbands and was living with a man not her husband (Jn 4.8-29) were always so weak as to require little modern scholarship to break them.

But unofficially—in popular piety and among those adhering to unexamined assumptions—the Magdalene is still the ex-whore. For example, tales of Mary Magdalene's lustful early life and repentance take up half of Marlee Alex's 1987 book for children entitled *Mary Magdalene: A Woman Who Showed her Gratitude*.[14] According to this account, the Magdalene 'was not famous for the great things she did or said, but she goes down in history as a woman who truly loved Jesus with all her heart and was not embarrassed to show it despite criticism from others'. This description is of course still based on the conflated passages, especially Luke 7 in which the unnamed sinner anoints Jesus. Relegated to a relatively minor position are those New Testament passages that actually mention the Magdalene. In those texts, she is remembered for the great things she did (she followed Jesus and was present at the cross and at the tomb) and for what she said (that the tomb was empty and that he was raised from the dead).

Another tradition about the Magdalene is preserved in several Gnostic works of the second to fourth centuries, including the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Pistis Sophia*, and the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene). These Gnostic works preserve a tradition about a rivalry or conflict between

13. Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples, *De Maria Magdalene et triduo Christi disceptatio* (Paris, 1517).

14. Marlee Alex, *Mary Magdalene: A Woman Who Showed her Gratitude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

the Magdalene and Peter or other male disciples. When she is challenged by Peter, Jesus (or, in one instance, Levi) defends her. Neither silenced nor excluded, the Magdalene speaks boldly and powerfully, entering into dialogue with the risen Jesus and comforting, correcting, and encouraging the male disciples. She is a visionary, praised for her superior spiritual understanding and often identified as the intimate 'companion' of the Savior. In the *Gospel of Philip* (63.34–64.10), Jesus is said to have kissed her often. An erotic element is also present in the Gospel of Mary: 'The Savior loved [her] more than the rest of women' and 'He loved her more than us [the male disciples]'. But unlike the Magdalene of later Western art and legend, the Gnostic Magdalene had not been a prostitute or sinner.[15] She does not represent repentance or forgiveness or regenerate sexuality.

If the erotic element in the Gnostic works does not reflect the tradition of an earlier sinful life, what does it signify? According to Elaine Pagels, 'The hint of an erotic relationship between [Jesus] and Mary Magdalene may indicate claims to mystical communion: throughout history, mystics of many traditions have chosen sexual metaphors to describe their experiences'.[16] It is likely that Mary Magdalene functioned in Gnostic circles not only as the representative of the female followers of Jesus, but also as a symbol of the importance and leadership of women among the Gnostics.[17] She may have been a role model on which some women based their claim to power. Women may have played important roles in these communities, both as leaders and as sources of revelation and authority.

This probably reflects the egalitarianism within the Jesus movement, itself rooted in the egalitarian form(s) of Judaism. As Rosemary Ruether has argued, 'The tradition of Mary Magdalene as a sinner was developed in orthodox Christianity primarily to displace the apostolic authority claimed for women through her name'.[18] From the Gnostic

15. Rather, another gnostic figure, Sophia (Wisdom) is associated with a fall through love and an agony of remorse.

16. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 18.

17. See D.M. Parrot, 'Gnostic and Orthodox Disciples in the Second and Third Centuries', in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson, Jr; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), pp. 218-19.

18. Rosemary Ruether, *Women–Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 286 n. 1. Contrast Pheme Perkins (*The Gnostic Dialogue* [New York: Paulist, 1980], p. 136 n. 10) who thinks that the role of Mary Magdalene in Gnostic texts is not evidence that the Gnostics upheld community leadership by women. Her role, however, is not the only evidence for this.

materials, we can glimpse what was displaced, distorted, lost and overlaid by the legend of Mary Magdalene as the whore.

Now we can begin to restore the Magdalene to her rightful place, as we look more deeply into the Gospel episodes in which she appears—and those in which she does not appear. Despite her importance, the Gospels themselves have neglected to tell us much about her. We are not told of her call by Jesus (or of any other woman's call, only of the call of males). No discussion or teaching during Jesus' ministry involves her. Only the figure(s) at the empty tomb and the risen Jesus speak to her. Dialogue with her as an individual occurs only in Jn 20.1-18. Outside of the Gospels, she is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament.

Yet the trace of her great significance remains. She travels with Jesus in Galilee and goes up with him to Jerusalem. She is there at the crucifixion and at the empty tomb. The risen Jesus appears first to her, and it is she who carries the word of his resurrection to the male disciples.[19] In this loyalty, courage, and religious insight is the foundation of her lasting memory.

Addendum

The Scholarly Guild, the Anointing Woman, Mary Magdalene, and Whores*

With the publication of her 2008 book *Sex Working and the Bible*,[20] Avaren Ipsen has challenged biblical scholars to consider the question of whether or not the scholarly guild can tolerate the memory of the 'anointing woman' being a prostitute. Well, I say, sure: why not? I have shown in articles as well as my book, *The Resurrection of Mary*

19. This tradition is probably historical, despite the fact that in Lk. 24.34, as in 1 Cor. 15.5, the first appearance is said to be to Peter (Cephas). Jn 20.8 presents the unnamed Beloved Disciple as the first to believe. Already in the New Testament period, the Magdalene's role was in the process of being diminished and distorted. In the memories, traditions, and rethinking of the Pauline and Lucan communities, her prominence was challenged by that of Peter: in Johannine circles, by that of the Beloved Disciple.

* The original version of this essay was delivered in a session of the Gender, Sexuality and the Bible Section of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2009.

20. Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible* (London: Equinox, 2008).

Magdalene,[21] how the Magdalene comes to be associated with the 'woman of the city, a sinner' in Luke 7. I was and am somewhat conflicted about deconstructing the legend, because I am aware that Mary Magdalene has been an important saint for prostitutes. The Magdalene also has given rise to guided or misguided efforts to help prostitutes. I am not concerned with theological decency and respectability, nor do I think it impossible that a prostitute could have been a leader in the Jesus movement. The legend that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute is powerful and it clings on in ways that may be useful.

The issue for me is that I do not think we gain much by confusing one woman with another. Might we not gain more by allowing each woman to have her own story? Toward that end I want to consider the various stories of a woman who anoints Jesus and, in particular, the story of the prostitute who anoints Jesus. I also want to speak to the question of Mary Magdalene and sexuality: If we say that Mary Magdalene was *not* a prostitute, can we still claim a sexual identity for her?

The Woman Who Anoints Jesus

Versions of the story about a woman who anoints Jesus are found in all four Gospels: Mk 14.3-9; Mt. 26.6-13, Lk. 7.36-50, and Jn 12.1-8. It is important to observe that in each of the Gospels, Jesus is physically anointed *only* by a woman: Early interpreters viewed Jesus' baptism as an anointing by God with the Holy Spirit. This tradition came to overshadow any human anointing as the source of Jesus' authority and identity as the Anointed One ('Christ').

The four versions of this story are striking for their similarities and differences. In three of the Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and John) the anointing by a woman is a prelude to the passion of Jesus in Jerusalem. In Luke, a woman anoints Jesus during his ministry in Galilee. In three of the versions, the anointing takes place at the house of Simon who is identified as a leper in Mark and Matthew and a Pharisee in Luke. In John, the anointing takes place in a house, but the house belongs to Lazarus. No name is given to the woman in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, while in John she is identified as Mary of Bethany. In all four versions, some of those present raise an objection to the anointing. Luke describes the woman as 'a woman in the city, who was a sinner'. It is likely that Luke means the audience to identify this woman's

21. Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

sin as prostitution;[22] the feet may be a euphemism for genitals. Of the four versions of this story, it is the one told by Luke that most people remember.

I believe there are likely two independent anointing stories: One tells the story of a prophet who anoints the head of Jesus, in effect marking him as the Messiah (Mark and Matthew). In this story, the woman brings an alabaster jar of expensive ointment and pours it on the head of Jesus. This is a dangerous action. It echoes stories in the Hebrew Bible of prophets anointing kings (1 Sam. 15.1; 16.13; 1 Kgs 1.45; 19.15-16; 2 Kgs 9.1-13; and the eschatological prediction in Dan. 9.24). In these narratives from the Hebrew Bible, when a prophet anoints someone the result is a political overthrow of some kind (1 Sam. 15.1-9; 18.10-16; 1 Kgs 1.5-53; 2 Kgs 2.14-28). This aspect is lost, however, in the Gospel narratives where the only conflict that the anointing gives rise to is over the cost of the ointment.

The second tells the story of a woman who anoints Jesus' feet (Luke and John). In John's version of the story, Mary of Bethany takes a pound of expensive ointment and, after anointing Jesus' feet, wipes them with her hair. As in Mark and Matthew, an issue is made over the cost of the ointment. Luke's 'sinner' wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses his feet, and anoints them with ointment. Normally, feet are not anointed with perfume, except for the feet of the dead. Washing the feet was an act of hospitality, but kissing them was usually an expression of gratitude for pardon. Unbound hair may be the mark of a 'loose woman' (Num. 5.18 LXX; *Sot*. 1.5); in Corinth, however, it was associated with women prophesying (1 Cor. 11.5-6).

In Mark, Matthew, and John those present protest not the action of the woman, but the cost of the ointment (the 'waste'). In these Gospels Jesus defends the woman, saying that the anointing is his embalming for burial. That interpretation of her deed as a prophetic acting out of the anointing of his corpse corrects and depoliticizes the claim to royalty (which was probably the point in Mark and Matthew), by means of the prediction of suffering. Mark 14.9, followed by Matthew, has Jesus predict that wherever the gospel is

22. Theresa Hornsby, 'The Woman is a Sinner: The Sinner is a Woman', in *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (ed. A.-J. Levine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 121-32; Kathleen E. Corley, 'Were the Women around Jesus Really Prostitutes? Women in the Context of Greco-Roman Meals', *SBLSP* 28 (1989), pp. 487-521 (521).

preached in the whole world, 'what she has done will be told in memory of her'. In Luke's version, however, the anointing itself is not central. Rather, focus is on the emotional extravagance of the woman's actions, on Jesus' acceptance of the touch of such a person, and on her being forgiven.

In Luke's version of the story, Jesus tells a parable of two debtors who are forgiven, the one forgiven more loving more. Then the parable is applied to the woman, who has shown Jesus more love than has Simon, the inadequate host. Love, in the logic of the parable, is both the cause and the result or sign of divine forgiveness. The woman embodies that love. Because of the emotional quality of her action and its lavishness, her love has a powerful erotic dimension. In this version of the story, it is Jesus, not the woman, who is shown to be a prophet (cf. 7.16; 24.19), who knows intimately the human heart and the mind of God who has forgiven her sins. Here, the anointing bears no relation to the death of Jesus. It is reduced to a display of unusual affection on the part of an intruding woman. A social outcast takes on herself the role of servant in gratitude to Jesus.

Mary Magdalene and Sexuality

None of the women who anoint Jesus is identified as Mary Magdalene. It is later tradition that conflates Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and through this connection with the 'sinner woman' who anoints Jesus in Luke 7. I have argued that thinking of Mary Magdalene as a whore, and the recently proposed alternative that she is the lover of wife of Jesus (so the *DaVinci Code* and others), are both avenues that serve (whether on purpose or not) to distract from what I think is her central role in the crucifixion and at the empty tomb. They also create a 'history' for the Magdalene that cannot be substantiated on the basis of the biblical text.

The problem is that we do not want to be left with an asexual or nonsexual Mary Magdalene. Historically, we know nothing about her age, looks, health, background, sexual orientation, occupation, and so forth. Our tendency, when we try to fill in the gaps, is to fall into the trap of romanticism and, in the absence of other information, the image of Mary Magdalene as a whore has easy appeal. Nearly all of the depictions of Mary Magdalene in painting and sculpture are of an ideally 'beautiful' young woman. Many fall into the category of 'pious pornography'; most do not visually emphasize redemption (once a whore always a whore and always available—at least partially available

as suggested by an exposed breast). The sexual attractiveness of Mary Magdalene and her imagined sexual relation to Jesus has seemed to me to be occasions in which the woman is used to think about the man; either the man looking at the art work, or the man Jesus, saving him from asexuality or homosexuality: making him a 'real' man. But perhaps these representations offer prostitutes or whores an opportunity also to see and reflect upon themselves. This may be one of the ways in which the legend of Mary Magdalene as prostitute remains useful.

But is there a way that we can speak about Mary Magdalene, or any real woman, in relation to sexuality without succumbing to sexual hierarchies? Avaren Ipsen cites Audre Lorde as a source for such reflection. I would like to quote Lorde further. She writes:

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives… [The erotic] is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire…women so empowered are dangerous.[23]

Lorde goes on to conclude: 'recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world', to be 'self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society'.[24] To think of Mary Magdalene in these terms, to think of her presence at the cross and the tomb as an expression of her erotic power, restores to her the political dimensions of her actions in relation to political powers of oppression.

In the end, it doesn't honor women to confuse them with one another, or to call women whores who are not literally whores, nor to blot out of history those who were and are. Of the 'many others' who were on the road with Mary Magdalene and who were at the cross with her, were some of them whores? I think, I imagine, yes. 'Jesus was nice to whores'—and so too we hope were the women in this movement that originally was one of inclusiveness and solidarity. I have been reading Melissa Raphael's book, *The Female Face of God at*

23. Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 53-59 (53-55).

24. Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic', p. 59.

Auschwitz, in which she proposes that rather than thinking of God as omnipowerful, but absent, silent, dead, we instead see the face of God in the women who cared for the children and each other and the dying. I think of Mary Magdalene at the cross and the tomb as the face of God. I think of her and the other women, some of whom were whores.

8

Mary Magdalene in the Movies: A Feminist Perspective*

Mention the name Mary Magdalene and most people will free-associate the word 'whore', albeit the repentant whore whose love for Jesus led him to forgive her. This image is perpetuated not only in literature and art, but also, and powerfully, in film. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Timothy Rice's 1970s musical, Mary Magdalene is depicted as a prostitute platonically in love with Jesus—not having a sexual affair with him but obsessed and baffled by him, not knowing how to love him. Franco Zeffirelli's TV movie *Jesus of Nazareth*, produced around the same time as *Jesus Christ Superstar*, portrays the Magdalene as a prostitute of angry intelligence, in contrast to Jesus' disbelieving male disciples. In Martin Scorsese's controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (based on the 1955 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis), the Magdalene is a tattooed prostitute to whom Jesus was attracted physically—his last temptation. More recently, Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* tells the story of a small troupe of five professional actors hired to do a passion play on church property. Here, the Magdalene is not a prostitute, but a model who is grateful to Jesus for saving her from having to strip for a job in a commercial. In his *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson follows the same trajectory as these predecessors, but with a twist: his Magdalene is conflated with the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8.2-11).

Film makers and feminist biblical scholars face a similar challenge in their work in the respect that both must negotiate historical and narrative 'gaps'. Feminist scholarship recognizes that the Christian Testament texts do not represent history 'as it was', but rather sees

* This essay is adapted from two earlier essays: 'Fast Forwarding through the Magdalene', *Semeia* 74 (1966), pp. 33-45, and 'Gibson's Mary Magdalene', in *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and the Passion of the Christ* (ed. Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 69-79.

them as male-authored, male-centered texts, whose perspectives involve ignoring, distorting, and suppressing the contributions of women, and whose gaps, silences, and discrepancies we must learn to read in order to reconstruct history. The film maker, faced with narrative gaps in the construction of a historically based script, must fill in the gaps as a matter of narrative necessity, of dramatic necessity. In the case of Mary Magdalene, this presents a significant challenge. A character who is central to the action and resolution at the end of the story, as is the Magdalene in the story of the crucifixion, burial, and empty tomb, cannot—should not—come out of nowhere (as she does in Mark, Matthew, and John, and almost in Luke, except for 8.1-3).[1]

In each of the films mentioned above, the film makers have chosen to present a Magdalene who is the conflated figure of legend, the repentant whore. This conflation plugs a gap,[2] by filling in with another story felt intense enough to explain the Magdalene's loyalty: the story of Luke 7 about 'a woman of the city, a sinner', who cries over Jesus' feet, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with oil, or, in the case of Gibson, the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8), who is saved when Jesus writes on the ground and insists that whoever is without sin cast the first stone.[3] In both cases, the woman is forgiven and told to sin no more, thereby explaining the Magdalene's later

1. The reader of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew is told, when Mary Magdalene and the other women appear at the crucifixion, that some of those named have been with Jesus all along, from Galilee. John gives no explanation of her presence. Only Lk. 8.1-3 mentions her and others in the ministry section of his Gospel, preparing for their presence at the cross: 'The twelve were with [Jesus] as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Suzanna, and many others, who provided for them [some manuscripts read: for him] out of their resources'.

2. See Mieke Bal (*Lethal Love: Feminist Readings of Biblical Love Stories* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], pp. 18-19) on the inadequacy of frame-theory as a key to the filling of gaps. 'Gaps' are places in the text where the information is insufficient, provoking questions for the reader. Bal wonders to what extent the text 'provokes' and how this personification of the text is used to cover a reader's response that cannot be accounted for outside the position of the reader as a subject. See also her discussion of questions not answered and that later become obsessions in the reader's mind or are abandoned.

3. According to Lev. 20.10 and Deut. 22.22, both the man (married or unmarried) and the woman (married or betrothed) should be put to death; witnesses are told to cast the first stones in Deut. 17.7. The fact that no guilty man is mentioned in the scene in Jn 8 is perhaps a touch of realism.

behavior in terms of loyalty based on gratitude.[4] Yet this conflation is somewhat strange in light of the fact that all of these films show some awareness of scholarship dating back to the 1960s. Arcand, for example, shows awareness of the mode of the crucifixion based on the ossuary find at Giv'at ha-Mitvar and seems to be familiar with the Gnostic materials, showing Mary Magdalene encouraging the others not to lose heart.

The feminist reader, looking for alternative stories to use or invent to stop this gap, is confronted with the realization yet again that there is a dearth of strong women characters in the Gospels.[5] She also reflects on the fact that the very concept of prostitute has meaning only within the ideology of male sexual domination and is produced by this system of sexual values, as Andrea Dworkin notes.[6] Modern feminism sees the prostitute primarily as victimized (listening to former prostitutes' description of their experiences in organizations such as Whisper); but they are also sometimes seen as entrepreneurs, with a right to their form of sexual freedom (listening to organizations such as Coyote). I think it would be safe to say that most women today view the prostitute with ambivalence and discomfort, probably in part because of the realization that 'male domination of the female body is

4. The Magdalene as prostitute appears in Zeffirelli, Scorsese, and Webber and Rice. In Arcand the actor or actors playing the Magdalene are not professional prostitutes (one is a priest's lover ['It gives him so much pleasure and me so little pain'] and the other a model ['I used to show my ass to sell soap and beer']). The Magdalene as the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8) appears in *The Last Temptation* and *The Greatest Story*, but perhaps in the latter as a careless misunderstanding of the law concerning adultery since the woman of Jn 8 is assumed to be a prostitute.

5. The Syro-Phoenician woman and the Samaritan woman are clearly not from Magdala and Herodias won't do.

6. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography* (New York: Perigee, 1979), p. 9. Throughout history, it is primarily women who have been prostitutes, called harlots or whores, sluts, cunts—terms applied to males only in an extended or figurative sense. 'Men have created the group, the type, the concept, the epithet, the insult, the industry, the trade, the commodity, the reality of woman as whore' (Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 200). The 'oldest profession' is accepted as an inevitable aspect of patriarchal society: the whore's sexual services to married or unmarried men maintain an illusion of monogamy or even polygamy, the myth of the male's greater sexual needs, and the possibility of fulfilling these needs without violating sexual obligation to any other male. She also has no protection; she is vulnerable and out of bounds. Reduced to her sexuality, she is experienced as dangerous to those men who want to and do resist her temptation or who do not. Blamed for provoking their sexual desire, enflaming their lust, she is often the target of male sexual aggression and hostility, moral outrage and condemnation. Think of the serial murder of prostitutes.

the basic material reality of [all] women's lives'.[7] In that ambivalence we can learn something of the on-going power of the conflated versions of the Magdalene story, a power reflected in the decision by film makers to ignore the contributions of feminist scholarship, and of Christian Testament scholarship in general in their constructions of the Magdalene.

Feminist biblical scholars seeking to challenge these images learn from feminist film criticism, which trains us to examine visual images alongside the verbal.[8] It trains us to examine who is looking at whom and who is not looking; to scrutinize the power relations that are depicted or hidden; to reflect on our experience as female and male and feminist spectators; to interrogate the gaps (in logic or story line or character) as apertures through which the patriarchal/kyriarchal ideology is revealed in its process of suppressing, revising, omitting; to view subversively, sometimes to try and reverse the thrust (?) of the film. In producing readings against the grain, oppositional readings, we gain information about our positioning as spectators, and make an intervention, disrupting the rhetoric of the filmic presentation. We spectators can construct different meanings.

My concentration here will be on the Magdalene as portrayed by Zeffirelli and Gibson. Zeffirelli first introduces Mary Magdalene at work, in a scene that has no antecedent in the biblical text. She is shown as a woman alone, unprotected by father, husband, lover, pimp. Her economic status is comfortable. While a client waits inside, she runs out in a screaming rage at some boys who are setting fire to her house, and angrily faces down the insults and laughter. Back inside, as she gets paid and helps her client dress, rebuffing his advances with disgust, he speaks to her of Jesus. This is the beginning of her

7. And all struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control of one's own body (Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 203). A sexist interpretation of this solidarity distinguishes the prostitute from other women not in kind but by degree. Dworkin quotes Otto Weininger ('There are certainly no women absolutely devoid of the prostitute instinct to covet being sexually excited by any stranger' [*Sex and Character* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p. 219]) and D.H. Lawrence ('If a woman hasn't got [a tiny?] streak of a harlot in her, she's a dry stick as a rule… [R]eally, most wives sold themselves, in the past, and plenty of harlots gave themselves, when they felt like it, for nothing' ['Pornography and Obscenity', in his *Late Essay and Articles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 236]). As Dworkin points out, the 'tiny streak' is woman's sexual nature.

8. For examples of feminist biblical scholars engaging film, see the work of Alice Bach and Cheryl Exum.

'conversion'.[9] No film, including Arcand's, depicts an unrepentant Magdalene who continues to work at prostitution. Zeffirelli's Magdalene does not enjoy her work with this client who considers her 'scum' and hides his face as he goes out; she is clearly above it—and above him.[10] When she is alone, she sits on her bed and lets the coins he has given her drop to the floor. She appears next at the feeding of thousands, peering at Jesus from behind a tree, looking disgusted, discouraged, confused. She receives bread, tears off a piece, and eats; cries and laughs oddly. The 'conversion' seems complete.

Zeffirelli introduces Luke 7 as a part of the 'back story' of the Magdalene. He combines the story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke with Mark 14 (the woman who anoints Jesus' head), a story that Luke omits. The woman (Mary Magdalene) enters screaming at those who would keep her out. The gazes of Simon, Jesus, and the other male guests fix on her as she glances fiercely around the room, and then focuses adoringly on Jesus. As she grovels at Jesus' feet, she ceases to speak, uttering instead a long, embarrassing series of wordless sighs and whimpers. The anger at the beginning and end of this scene frames, to my mind, a jarring unreality of character. Is this really a woman who would grovel and snivel like this? She moves from representing somebody's idea of the force and danger of female sexuality and male fear of it, to representing sexuality tamed (which is accompanied by cessation of speech). Jesus' acceptance and forgiveness brings her under control, under his protection. This is reinforced when Jesus smugly calls her 'daughter' in spite of the significant difference in the actors' ages.

What is it that Jesus is forgiving?[11] The sin that patriarchal society says the woman is guilty of: prostitution. That labeling passes unquestioned in the mutual look(s) exchanged by the Magdalene and Jesus. Also disturbing here is the underlying assumption that the prostitute voluntarily chooses her profession, and is only under the slightest duress. Because she chose it, she can un-choose; she can be converted and forgiven. The whimpering seems to mean sorrow, repentance,

9. She responds with suspicion ('A man will often forgive a man but a woman's sins—that's another story') and apparent lack of interest (she says she sleeps during the day so cannot go to see Jesus).

10. Contrast Scorsese's introduction of the Magdalene at work, watched at her work by the viewer and by a waiting room full of men including Jesus.

11. What gives the scene its power is its ambiguity: Jesus does not say she should be punished for the 'many sins' which evidently gave her no pleasure—but that she is forgiven—without being punished—or are the tears and whimpering evidence of having been (self?) punished enough?

relief. Her body is presented through the eyes of the men in the scene: in a series of tight shots looking down on her; in a close up framed by Jesus' hands.

Although Gibson draws on a different 'back story' for the Magdalene, the portrayal is predictably similar. Introduced as a flashback, the Magdalene, kneeling on the stones where she wipes up the blood from Jesus' scourging, recalls Jesus writing in the dirt. The camera's perspective is ground level, and as he writes, the stones slip from the hands of the men in the crowd and crash to the ground; the woman's hand then snakes out toward Jesus as his hand reaches down and lifts her up. The viewer sees her dirty embroidered sleeve, her weeping face, her dangling earrings. This ground-level perspective is very effective in conveying her abjectness and Jesus' relationship to her as superior to inferior, powerful to powerless. For the sake of this perspective, Gibson makes interesting changes in the text he is interpreting. In the movie Jesus stands up from his writing and then glances down at Mary Magdalene, at which point she crawls to him for mercy and forgiveness; but in the biblical text, the woman has been standing all along, before the crowd and before Jesus, who rises to speak to her. These 'back stories' in Zeffirelli and Gibson can be contrasted with 'the Last Temptation', where the Magdalene's sexuality threatens to draw Jesus away from his goal, and where she must die—at least in his dream.

We ask, how would these scenes look if presented from the woman's perspective. Where would the camera need to be placed in order to capture this perspective? How might a feminist writer/director reconceive the scene of this meeting between Jesus and a prostitute/adulterer? What if she were allowed to speak?

As a viewer of these films, how might a female spectator's experience of this scene differ from a male's? If a woman spectator identifies with the Magdalene as represented here, is she identifying with a sign that represents something in the male unconscious: fearsome, immoral, female sexuality? Is she forced to participate in a masochistic fantasy: the Magdalene blamed and blaming herself, internalizing her guilt, from which she is then released by the paternal Jesus? The Magdalene as presented in these two films is a powerless, victimized figure reinforcing a sense of worthlessness and sexual shame, then moving through that, almost out of sexuality.[12] More importantly, there is,

12. Contrast this to Arcand's non-servile Magdalene, one of a group of friends. Her love and self-esteem, however, are also based on gratitude for his defense of her—in this case when he overturns the equipment at the advertising studio ('I love you, you crazy nut', she tells him).

through identification with the Magdalene, recognition of the system of domination. 'As long as it does exist', says Andrea Dworkin, speaking of pornography, 'we must understand that we are the women in it: used by the same power, subject to the same valuation…'[13]

What other options are there here for viewing? If a female spectator identifies with the active male subject, Jesus, then what? What about a male spectator's identification with either character? We ask also: How do different women of differing social, ethnic, economic, and sexual locations view such a scene? Trying on multiple viewpoints destabilizes and further problematizes the identification process.

Luke 8.1-3, which mentions the women among those following Jesus, is not visualized in either Zeffirelli's or Gibson's film (why not use this as a flashback rather than the woman caught in adultery?). Mary Magdalene is not seen as a follower; she is absent, relegated to the outskirts of the movement. In both films, however, her change in status from 'sinner' to 'saved' is signaled during the scenes surrounding the crucifixion through her clothing: in Zeffirelli she now wears black; in Gibson, black with a white headband (although her long, wild hair is uncovered during the procession to Calvary and her neckline is lower than that of Mary, the mother of Jesus). How does she live now or earn a living? Who knows? Who cares? Although the Christian Testament gives Mary Magdalene no lines to speak in the Passion narratives, both Gibson and Zeffirelli break with the narrative at this point. In Gibson, the Magdalene shouts to a Roman soldier that he should stop the Jewish crowd that has arrested Jesus in secret. A colleague of the high priest shuts her up, telling the soldier, 'She's crazy'. It is significant that she appeals to Rome, not to the Sanhedrin, but her initiative is nonetheless ineffectual. In Zeffirelli, where the Magdalene stands surrounded by men in the crowd before Pilate, she screams over and over for Jesus' release; one of them smacks her in the face and silences her: 'Shut up, you slut'. Although no longer a prostitute, she is still treated as one.

There is a fascinating confusion in the four canonical Gospels' descriptions of the crucifixion concerning who was present. Mark lists three women by name—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome—and mentions many other women who had come up with Jesus to Jerusalem. Matthew lists Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee, along with many women who had followed Jesus

13. Dworkin, *Pornography*, p. 224.

from Galilee. Luke writes of the women who were following with him from Galilee (see Lk. 8.1-3) and all those (masculine in Greek) known to him; then Luke names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and the other women with them at the empty tomb. But John places at the Crucifixion 'his mother and his mother's sister Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene', and the disciple (masculine in the Greek) whom Jesus loved. It is not clear whether John is referring to two, three, or four women, since the Greek does not punctuate.

Both Gibson and Zeffirelli privilege an abridged Gospel of John over the Synoptics. In Gibson, the two Marys, joined by the disciple John, rush from the courtyard of the high priest's house to Pilate's headquarters, up and down the streets on the way to the cross, to Calvary, jostled by the crowds. The mother is always prominent in the trio, almost always in the center of the frame and given the most close-ups. Mary Magdalene is behind her or to the left of the frame. At Calvary she hangs back while John (understood by Gibson, but not by most scholars, as the disciple Jesus loved) and Mary (the mother) walk forward to stand together at the foot of the cross to hear the words, 'Woman, behold your son' and 'Behold your mother' (Jn 19.26-27). The mother has begun to edge out Mary Magdalene, to whom no words are spoken. It is the mother who, after the scourging, has held and comforted the weeping Mary Magdalene. Despite following John's account of the scene at the foot of the cross, Gibson leaves off at this point: Mary Magdalene will not go to the tomb, will not see it empty, will not encounter the risen Jesus or proclaim the news of his resurrection to the disciples. She simply disappears.

Zeffirelli also places Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene, standing farther off, attempts to move close to the cross, but is stopped by the centurion. She says she is 'one of the family'. Jesus' mother, startled, looks back over her shoulder and then confirms this, 'Yes, she is one of the family', in a moment of female bonding. Mary Magdalene will claim to be family again to guards at the tomb, taking leadership of the two other women (Martha and Mary?) who have come with spices. Zeffirelli ends that tomb scene with the women running from the tomb, the Magdalene in front holding out the linen sheet, a shot that can be compared with Arcand's of the Magdalene actor running from the light in a dark tunnel.[14]

14. There is no tomb or resurrection in Scorsese's treatment, only light, bells, drums. Compare to the abstract ending of Arcand's.

In Zeffirelli, the Magdalene's final scene begins with a knock and ends with a door banging shut. It contains the Magdalene's only act of self-defense—as far as I know—in the history of interpretation. When she is disbelieved in Lk. 24.11 and Markan Appendix 16.11, there is no defense. In Gnostic literature, however, Jesus and Levi defend her. In Zeffirelli's film she comes to the hiding disciples and narrates how she has 'seen the Lord'. They are silent, then embarrassed, evasive. She turns to John as the one who will surely believe her, but he does not. Mary Magdalene and John, face to face, are in a power struggle; the lighting is harsh, suddenly overexposed; she is old, washed out by the light, wrinkled. He tells her she's tired: 'Please, please go'. As she gives up and moves angrily toward the door, one of them mutters, 'women's fantasies'. Here the anger of the Magdalene (played by Anne Bancroft) comes to a healthy head: Medusa-like, she glares with contempt for the disciples and turns around the movie game of gazing. She growls, 'Was his death a fantasy?… Why should he not appear to me?… [then coldly] He told me to tell you, and I have done so.'

She flings back the bar on the door and slams out.

The door slowly springs back open. The doorway is empty. No one has asked the Magdalene to stay; no one goes after her; her absence is not mourned; no one in the story gives her a thought when she is gone. She was a woman who knew too much (in contrast to Gibson's Magdalene who knows nothing at all).[15]

The movie, however, is not over: it concludes with an all-male world that the viewer is supposed to enter. A discussion among the disciples over who believes and who does not climaxes with Peter declaring, 'I have always believed'. Talk then turns to forgiveness. Peter (looking towards the camera) speaks of a 'we': we who are all cowards, all who betrayed, all who abandoned. In this scene where women are absent it is a 'we' that excludes women. The Magdalene's message about an empty tomb disappears under the weight of Peter's belief. Her significance is again reduced to forgiveness, which is appropriated, in the end, by Peter.

In the final scene of Zeffirelli's film, Jesus comes to the male disciples (following Matthew's Gospel); they gather around him and are sent out to make disciples (male?). Visually echoing the Magdalene

15. In the Gnostic *Dial. Sav.* 139.12-13 the Magdalene is described as 'a woman who understood completely'. She is the one who sees the light (*Gos. Phil.* 64.5-9), who is 'blessed beyond all women on earth' for her spiritual understanding (*Pis. Soph.* 1.19), and in whom resides 'a virile and courageous mentality' (*Acts Phil.* 8.3).

teaching, Jesus teaches: 'I am with you always', *blah, blah, blah*. The power of the Magdalene's last scene and the empty door, for me as a viewer, has drained all power from these male scenes that follow it. It un-ends the ending. In spite of Peter's attempt to pull us in, the resistant viewer has been long gone, out the door with the Magdalene.

Where does she go? Into pre-Christian and/or post-Christian space. At the cross she joined a family; is she alone again now, or in the potentially subversive world of female bonding? In Zeffirelli, there has been a glimpse of female self-empowerment and female bonding—and most importantly, more than a glimpse of female anger. The female spectator has been allowed to *feel* anger. The ideal viewer, however, the viewer the film tries to create, is not meant to follow the Magdalene in imagination out the door. But the powerful absence she leaves in the final scene lingers in the memory of the resistant spectator.

Looking at these various treatments of the Magdalene in film we glimpse all the choices to be made, even in the case of a classic text, known by heart to many viewers. Yet even in films based on her legend, not history, the Magdalene is a focalizer of the experience of Christian women. I read the empty doorway as leaving open the possibility *not* that she will come back, but that the men can get out.[16] It is the exit to a tomb that is not (yet) empty.

The resistant viewer wonders: What is she doing out there? As the movie moves on, we move out.

16. Thanks to Norman Gottwald and Alice Bach for their questions about its symbolism.

9

Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene on TV*

Mary of Nazareth

In 1996 I was recruited to be a 'talking head' on a program produced by Lifetime TV titled, 'Intimate Portraits: Mary of Nazareth'. Jane Crawford, the producer and writer, gave me and other talking heads our instructions: this is not a real conversation so always repeat the question in your answer; do not mention the names of other scholars; do not mention scholarship at all; and do not say the F word. I was surprised. But no, the unspeakable word was feminism. Someone higher up in Lifetime TV, a Roman Catholic, had said no to the F word and also to the R word, rape. The show was not to be 'a feminist diatribe'. The chain of command (in 1996) from top to bottom was Disney, Lifetime, Intimate Portraits, NonFiction Films, Persistent Pictures (Crawford's outfit). The producer's firm, Persistent Pictures (on the bottom of the chain), was hired by NonFiction Films; Persistent Pictures took the project to Lifetime.

Why no F word, no R word? I was told this was because of the sponsors. The church was not notified about the program, but a group of Roman Catholics in the Lifetime network saw several cuts and insisted on changes. A Roman Catholic scholar, Laurence Frizzell of Seton Hall University, was added to the lineup for 'balance'. The scholars were chosen by word of mouth, one scholar recommending another.[1] For this show, the experts were: John Spong, Laurence Frizzell (both in clerical garb), Paula Fredriksen, Miriam Peskowitz, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and myself.

When I spoke to Crawford after the taping, she said that the woman who ran Intimate Portraits had assured her at the beginning that controversy was OK, but soon realized with some dismay that

1. Some scholars were rejected as 'crackpots', or as 'unreadable'; others were not reachable or not interested.

'even the most benign show would be controversial'. She was stunned by Spong's contention (not in the final script) that ninety-nine percent of what is known about Mary of Nazareth is mythological; the rest is 'money and power in the name of a story'. Crawford focused on protecting her experts, and was relieved in the end that 'no one was harmed'. In the creative process, which took only eight weeks, everything that was not 'understandable' was cut. The historical material was considered too controversial because it placed doubt on the mythological Mary. We were pressed to talk about what Mary was thinking and feeling. In the producer's opinion, this maudlin edge badly compromised the program, but it was a small step in the right direction for network TV.

The scripts, which evolved out of the scholarly interviews and transcripts, belong to the producer/writer. The final script belongs to Lifetime. Curious about the stages of production, I contacted Stewart Recant, the executive producer and owner of NonFiction to ask if I could compare the aired version with an earlier rough cut version, but I was told there was no earlier version.[2]

> We don't have it, and we wouldn't make it available if we had it… I'm not interested in opening that up for review. This is not a question of censorship; the business we're in is creative; it's like a sculpture, we discard things… We're not interested in pursuit of a scholarly discussion of how we made the program. Business issues are the overriding issues. The TV process is about time balance, narrative focus, telling stories. We aim to satisfy the largest audience possible.[3]

The Lifetime show on Mary got two points, which means two million people viewed it, a lot for that kind of show; the producers were pleased. The sponsors included Matrix Shampoo, Pontiac, Scott's Turf Builder, Krylon paint spray, Jergens, A T & T, Pillsbury, and—this caught my eye—Domino's Pizza. This last was owned at the time by Tom Monahgan, an ultra-conservative Catholic, founder of Ave Maria Law School, of an organization called Legatus (for right wing Catholic CEOs), and of the right wing magazine *Credo*, which had been attacking my department and my university for the last few years. The other companies—who knows what or who they are owned by, what amount of interest or control they had?[4]

2. The secretary of NonFiction remarked that my request was 'odd. Perhaps if you were a film student…' But she passed me on to several people with 'more authority'.

3. My notes of a phone conversation 23 May 1996.

4. I've been accused of seeing 'boogeymen'. Here is one.

I was left with other unanswered questions as well: for example, concerning the interplay between TV and print media. *US News and World Report* religion editor Jeff Schieler had advised NonFiction Films about 'The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth', which then became a *US News* cover story. What was the relation of the LifeTime production of Mary of Nazareth to previous and subsequent national print coverage?

The content of the show that aired made it difficult to watch. Mary was presented as 'the chosen, compassionate, selfless mother who mothered Jesus and inspired him in his faith'. She is 'one of the most revered and influential women of all time', and her story is 'about motherhood and love'. Biblical texts are harmonized, and apocryphal material is used to fill in the story. All of it is presented as simple history; inaccuracies abound. Like other programs on biblical topics, this one is a strange mix of reenactments, paintings, old movies, and talking heads. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has observed, 'the head, which is potentially separable from the body, poses special dilemmas when it belongs to a woman… If the head [location of voice, identity, power, and mind] is typically thought of as masculine, then what is to be made of the female head?… Decapitation is one way of solving the dilemma.'[5]

Spong lists three theories about the pregnancy of Mary: it resulted from a miraculous virginal conception, or sex between her and Joseph, or an illegitimate liaison. Spong does not say which view he holds, Frizzell holds the first to the alternatives, and I am seen holding the bag, explaining the rape law in Deuteronomy 22 (so the R word did get in). But the voiceover has already told the viewer that Mary is 'surprised to be pregnant', and that 'many people throughout time have been puzzled by the mystery of this miracle'. Frizzell remarks that the Catholic Church stresses that it is more important to have faith in the power of God than to question the birth of Jesus.

The narrator says Mary's 'Years with her little family were her happiest years…raising her special young son—this exceptional child…the man who would change the world'. Peskowitz supplies information about the dangers of childbirth, courtyards, gardens and wells, storing foods, bakeries, trades, education, work in Sepphoris, and so forth.

5. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 'Introduction: The Spectacle of the Female Head', in *Off with her Head! Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture* (ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-14 (1).

Mary is said to have raised a son who respected women: Frizzell says she instilled in Jesus 'generosity…that he was able to accept the discipleship of several women'. There is nothing here on the situation of the poor under Roman occupation, or on endangered women. The presence of Mary at the crucifixion is taken as historical, 'her most difficult moment'. 'Jesus' last undertaking is to ensure his mother's welfare.' 'Did Mary trust that her son's death was a necessary sacrifice?', the voiceover asks. 'Her legacy is one of the most far reaching in history… she is a woman who obediently and humbly accepted her mission'.

Spong notes that the 'human heart cries out for a female image that is part of God'; to which Frizzell can be seen to respond that Mary is 'the spiritual mother of all Christians'. Fredriksen says Mary represents 'some of the most positive and endearing dimensions of ways humans think of females: she is compassionate, she intercedes, is not the disciplinarian. She is a protective and loving figure.' The narrator speaks about apparitions and healing shrines, Lourdes hosting 500,000 people annually. I say that, looking towards the future, we want to consider what women see, a human Mary who is not much like the figure of the past (a remark that looks foolish and patently wrong). 'Whatever we believe', the voice insists, 'her legacy endures'. She is 'a contemporary icon…appropriated by manufacturers of good luck charms and other purveyors of popular culture'. As 'the faithful and courageous and selfless mother…she stands alone as one of the most revered and influential women of all time'.

Participation was disturbing to me for many reasons. I was dimly aware of the danger of distorting views, of censorship and silencing, of the need for and difficulty of speaking in sound bites. But viewing the finished program I could see how scholarly controversy was sidestepped in almost every case, how story was taken as history in a positivistic, psychologizing way, how the work of biblical studies and feminist interpretation was smeared and buried under smarmy music and images. The fact that the ancient texts are being interpreted and that history is being reconstructed within frameworks and assumptions is never mentioned, nor are the political dimensions of feminist studies. I was aware before that we had no control over our words and work, but not aware to what extent.

Mary Magdalene

The ad for the A&E program Mary Magdalene: An Intimate Portrait' reads:

> Who was Mary Magdalene? Was she the love of Jesus' life or simply the strongest of his followers? How did she become the bad girl of the Bible, the forbidden woman?… This penetrating film investigates the mysteries surrounding Mary Magdalene, one of the least understood women in history. It is a story not only about religion, but about sexuality and power. Ultimately, it is a story about love.'

She was 'the woman redeemed by Jesus' love'.

bell hooks speaks about love as 'the primary way we end domination and oppression', and about the 'important politicization of love'.[6] 'Were we', she says 'collectively, to demand that our mass media portray images that reflect love's reality, it would happen. The change would radically alter our culture.'[7] 'We can exercise power all the time by not choosing to invest time, energy, or funds to support the production and dissemination of mass media images that do not reflect life-enhancing values, that undermine a love ethic.'[8] hooks quotes Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, who identifies romantic love as one 'of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought'. 'Its destructiveness', says hooks, 'resides in the notion that we come to love with no will and no capacity to choose'.[9] Both of these television programs can be evaluated in the light of hooks's comments. In Lifetime's 'Mary of Nazareth' self-sacrificing, suffering motherhood illustrates this love without choice, its pure perfection far removed from the realities of women and children, especially those who make up the majority of the poor.

In the A&E production, there is again the easy blend of legend and history, paintings, drawings, reenactments, and talking heads. The scholars were: Karen King, Katherine Jansen, Kathleen Corley, Thomas P. Rausch (in clerical garb), and me. Sponsors include Toyota Camry ('I'm too sexy'), Sentinel for dogs, American Cancer Society, JP Morgan, and Danton yogurt ('a texture to excite the soul'). Mila Morison of Fillmore's produced and wrote the work for A&E; I don't know what the parent company is for A&E.

6. bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 2000), p. 76.
7. hooks, *All about Love*, p. 95.
8. hooks, *All about Love*, pp. 96-98.
9. hooks, *All about Love*, p. 170.

This second video has much more of a feminist stamp. Mila Morison was a Religious Studies major at Duke. She knew A.-J. Levine when the latter was a graduate student, and contacted her for information. At the beginning of the program, the announcer says in sonorous tones that Mary Magdalene's role is more complicated than that presented by her most common image, of the sinner turned saint. 'In recent times a fuller image of the historical Mary Magdalene has emerged and has been gaining acceptance, and it has a profound impact on our very understanding of Christianity'. King calls Mary Magdalene the leader of one wing of the early Christian movement, her authority based on her prophetic ministry, and makes it clear that she was 'invented as a prostitute to counter the reality of her as a leader'. I suggest that the legend and Magdalene art fill a need to punish women for their sexuality. Corley suggests Mary was sent out to preach; the company of disciples is said to have consisted of men and women (but then only men are depicted in the reenactments). There are clear efforts to avoid anti-Judaism, and the figure of Mary Magdalene is assessed as one to which women can appeal for their ministry and their speech (King), her legacy representing unfinished agendas (Schaberg).

One can fault the program for lack of nuance about Roman occupation in the first third of the first century CE, for giving the impression that the *Gospel of Mary* comes from Nag Hammadi, that messianic hopes were essential and central to those in the Jesus movement. I was surprised, however, by two elements in this program. Both can be, and have been, interpreted in a feminist framework as strategies for diminishing the power of Mary Magdalene, but such interpretations were cut here: (1) the emphasis on Mary Magdalene as wealthy, and (2) emphasis on her as mad, insane. The issue of her sexuality underlies both.

(1) Luke 8 is taken to mean that the historical Mary Magdalene was independently wealthy, perhaps earned a living in a family fishing business, or did not have to work throughout her life (Corley). 'She was very rich…' She was one of Jesus' patronesses, which placed her in a socially superior position (King), though she was also assigned domestic duties, table service, a symbol for the kingdom (Corley). This stress on wealth is found only in Luke, and to my mind reduces the role of Mary Magdalene as well as the other women to that of financial supporters. It also slides over easily into her reputation as a prostitute. 'As she grew into adulthood her story becomes clouded' by the legend that she was a prostitute. 'Wealth is considered to be a

downfall for her', who had an 'exorbitant sexual appetite' (Jansen). Although the legend that she was a prostitute is also clearly interpreted (by King) as a reaction against her authority, the impression is given in most segments that the legend is as old as her story. This impression is countered in a voiceover after a break: '2000 years after her death, evidence suggests [her conflation with the woman in Lk. 7] is a case of mistaken identity compounded by medieval sexism'.

From her wealth to her reputation as a prostitute we move to her relationship with Jesus: Sexual or not? Physical as well as spiritual? 'Gnostic' materials are quoted, and a range of views are mentioned: Corley says we would like to think they were lovers ('It's so romantic') but judges it unlikely that Jesus was in any kind of sexual relationship. I say let it remain ambiguous. Rausch says 'there is absolutely no evidence that they were anything other than good friends'.

(2) The madness: Mary Magdalene was 'probably a prosperous and pious young woman, yet the Bible suggests she was troubled'. Her demon possession is interpreted as epilepsy or mental illness (Corley), obsession or addiction, a not understood compulsion, a binding by the spirits of unfreedom (Rausch), a sign of the lack of Holy Spirit (King). Her exorcism, linked with her first encounter with Jesus, 'sets her free of what oppressed her, made her a new woman' (Rausch), made her 'holy and pure' (King). This aspect is illustrated by a striking visual of madness, perhaps suggesting voracious lust, which is repeated twice.

Robert Price has argued, I think rightly, that the claim that Mary Magdalene had been demon-possessed is a trace of polemics against what was regarded as her heresy, and hence her authority. '[I]t is hard to see how being tagged with the reputation of sevenfold demon-possession would not seriously undermine one's credibility as an apostle'.[10] Ruth Padel notes that in early Greek thought, because a female body has more openings than a male's, the female's was considered to be more permeable; consequently women were more susceptible to the entrance of spirits.[11] Medieval society made a

10. Robert Price, 'Mary Magdalene, Gnostic Apostle?', *Grail* 6 (1990), pp. 73-74.

11. Ruth Padel, 'Women: Models for Possession by Greek Daemons', in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), pp. 3-19. Karen King says, to her knowledge, 'this conceptuality is nowhere explicitly present in early Christianity…nonetheless, the continued emphasis in other texts on the sexual purity or impurity of women prophets may carry this conceptuality subliminally' ('Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]', in *Women Preachers and*

connection between woman's preaching and demonic possession.[12] I think we may have in Luke 8 and the Markan Appendix the earliest Christian example of such a connection.

Mary Magdalene is the madwoman in Christianity's attic. Her madness—historical or not—demands feminist analysis. Can it stand for resistance and subversion, for rage and brave protest against patriarchy, for a kind of sanity? In this sense, Mary Magdalene's madness would be a preferable alternative to healing. Unless with the healing came power and speech, not taming and submission. Unless the protest was successful, the former madwoman spoke, and created possibilities for the transformation of the social order.[13]

What of Mary Magdalene's role at the cross and after? Following Jesus' arrest, the narrator says, 'she must have been utterly devastated… Her love for Jesus was greater than her fears. She stood faithfully by him through the long agony of his death, watched as he was laid in a rocky tomb, hastened to anoint the corpse.' At this point the program deals only with the Fourth Gospel, and Rausch is the expert. Mary is said to have believed the tomb of Jesus had been robbed. 'Racked with grief she collapsed in tears', and encountered the risen Jesus. 'Overcome with emotion she reached forward to embrace him, but Jesus gently rebuked her'. Mary does not understand that 'you can't cling to this experience', that Jesus is present in a new way (Rausch). This is the last time she appears in the Bible, but here she becomes the apostle to the apostles. 'She fits to a T the definition of an apostle' (Rausch).

The story continues using 'gnostic' and legendary materials. The *Gospel of Mary* depicts Mary inspiring the discouraged apostles, a leader who keeps the Jesus movement alive. King comments that from Christianity's beginnings 'we see women in leadership and their

Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity [ed. Beverly M. Kindle and Pamela J. Walker; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998], pp. 21-41 [30]).

12. See 'Preface: Authority and Definition', in Kindle and Walker (eds.), *Women Preachers and Prophets*, p. xv: 'Sigewize…[was] judged as possessed because of her desire to preach publically'. Karen King ('Prophetic Power', p. 28) refers to Tertullian's condemnation of the prophet Philumene as 'an enormous prostitute', associating her 'erroneous' teachings with penetration by evil spirits and hence sexual pollution (Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 6, 30). On the belief that false prophets were inspired by the devil and his demons, see Tertullian, *De anima* 11 (referred to by King, 'Prophetic Power', p. 29).

13. See Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

leadership opposed', in every century including our own. The *Golden Legend*, twelve hundred years later, is explained by Jansen as a legend created to explain how Mary Magdalene made it to France in a rudderless boat, preached, converted many, and then spent her last thirty years isolated in a grotto 'naked, fasting, listening to angels', a medieval mystic communing with the divine. At her death, she is incorporated into the male-led church—all this narrated without feminist critique.

Although the claim is made that Mary Magdalene's 'true story is more amazing than any legend', the legends are presented at length and perhaps, depending on the viewer, as more fascinating; they seem to me to overpower the program. Feminist biblical scholarship, and the use made of it by contemporary reform and renewal movements inside and outside Christianity, may yet tip the balance on the fascination chart in favor of historical reconstructions of Mary Magdalene with what they reveal about techniques of suppression and the amazing persistence of subversive memory. But that is not quite what this program is about.

Jack Perkins, in summary, describes her as a 'leader and evangelist, a mystic and prophet. To this day, Mary Magdalene continues to inspire both veneration and controversy. On July 22 services in her honor are part of a larger argument about the role of women in the Catholic church—always a course of heated debate… Tomorrow on Biography: Prince William.'

A Feminist Response

Both of these programs seem to me deeply flawed, but flawed in interesting ways. The F word appears in neither. They are hawking images of the good girl and the bad girl of the Christian Testament, two interlocking icons or archetypes, on commercial air time, for the purposes of entertainment, of attracting advertisers and audience. I don't know who watches, or who buys the DVDs, and whether they are used for study purposes in schools and churches. The educational forum of the TV documentary is relatively new in biblical studies, and it is powerful. It cannot be dismissed as 'fluff' and demands analysis. As feminists, we are trained to ask, 'Whose interests are served here, and precisely how?' What are the politics of these undertakings? And can this form be put to feminist use?'

The Bible itself in both these programs is spared all criticism.[14] It survives inerrant, unchallenged; disagreements stem from different interpretations in later centuries. It is not communicated that the Gospels themselves and the communities and individuals of the early church period have agendas, among them the suppression of women. This is left to later generations. The Bible is spared; it is not, however, marketed: nothing urges its reading or analysis. The church, too, is spared: in the 'Mary of Nazareth' program, the Catholic church's veneration of her as Virgin Mother is intact; in the program on Mary Magdalene, Rausch says: 'probably a great injustice to the church lies behind this legend of her prostitution'.[15]

What should feminists do, in light of the flaws and also in light of the potential benefits? Can we take the risk of participating? Can we afford not to?[16] Pierre Bourdieu urges us openly and collectively to ask questions: about being on television, what happens when people are on television, under what conditions this is a good choice, even a duty. 'With television, we are dealing with an instrument that offers, theoretically, the possibility of reaching everybody… Is what I have to say meant to reach everybody? Am I ready to make what I say understandable by everybody?… Do I have something to say? Can I say it in these conditions? Is what I have to say worth saying here and now? In a word, what am I doing here?'[17]

14. The only exception is the statement by Fredriksen in the 'Mary of Nazareth' program that the slaughter of the innocents by Herod is not historical. That was allowed, Crawford told me, because Frizzell assured the producers that the Roman Catholic Church knew that this episode was not historical.

15. These programs appear at first glance as more timid than those produced by the Jesus Seminar, which seems to get away with dismantling both Bible and church, but which are ultimately comforting and politically conservative insofar as they show scholars 'able to produce a single scientific, true, reliable and non-ideological reading of the Bible' (see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Interpretation* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999], p. 42). When the programs under review here crack that surface by showing different scholarly reconstructions and a flash or two of the scholars' own commitments and sociopolitical situations, they are seen to be bolder.

16. Anne Carson writes, 'TV is inherently cynical. It speaks to the eye, but the mind has no eye… TV is a condition of weightless balance, like a game' ('TV Men', in *Glass, Irony and God* [New York: New Directions, 1995], pp. 55-72 [55-56, 60]). But TV is not a game.

17. Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 14-15. Questions given out in advance of the interview for the Mary Magdalene show included the following: What was the most important moment in Mary Magdalene's

Feminist scholars have, I think, several options: (1) Refuse to participate at all in the kinds of productions described here (which are all there are right now); (2) participate only if granted some control over one's own contribution (time, topic, freedom of speech); (3) insist on having an advisory role, for example helping to determine the questions asked (this probably would mean being paid); (4) develop courses and other ways in which scholars and students can get some training in the use of media, the art of the sound bite, and collaborate with and consult each other on specific projects of this kind, and analyze the programs that have been made so far; (5) create through the Society of Biblical Literature's 'Women in the Biblical World' section or some such organization a speakers' bureau or an advisory panel on women's biblical issues and images which would announce itself available to the networks, including PBS, CNN, CBC, and the BBC as well as other media; (6) interest some foundation in the possibility of funding feminist work in this area; (7) work with some organization like the National Film Board of Canada which in the past has produced important feminist programs such as 'Half the Kingdom'; (8) learn from and with individuals and sections in the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature who have expertise in the visual arts and music, to create new and fuller representations of feminist imagination, and—finally—(9) develop ways in which it can be made clear that feminist scholarship challenges interlocking structures of domination and grounds itself in the experience of women. Seize the agendas and frameworks of discussion.

life? What was her childhood like? Any chance that she and Jesus were lovers? Was she really a prostitute?

Pomegranate Seeds

Persephone was standing at the bus stop by Clark Park
flirting with the drug dealers and the drunks
laughing in a large and innocent way
with friends from her class at Western International High School.

He pulls up in a raggedy Buick and stops.
What's up? he focuses on her.
He's a little guy, but cute, looks harmless
and besides, her friends are excited, jealous, teasing.
He's there the next day too so she gives him her beeper number.
He pages her and they talk and talk on the phone:
about how fine she is, how he loves the way she moves, been watching her
how he's 20, got a job, how he's been suicidal, this and that.
So she tells him her address and he shows up next afternoon, having concocted a story for her mama
how he's in the class above Persephone's at Western
see does she tell her mama the truth.
So when he says Get in, I'll drive you home
she says Why not and her girlfriends hoot and call out suggestions.
The weedy lot is only a few blocks away
not in the direction of home.
She remembers the broken Mohawk bottles, the potato chip bags
and the scrubby trees and how he reached over and locked her door and began to mess with her and she let him and how he smelled bad
and the car smelled
a minute of sweet talk and then his tongue down her throat
sweet talk enough to get her in the back seat
ripped upholstery and overflowing ashtray
then he's on her unzipped, his penis rubbery and dangling
hands up her skirt yanking down her pants, kneeling on her, into her grunting grunting
her head smashed against the arm rest
when she sees the police's face looking through the windshield and he's yanking him off her and out, asking how old is she,
calling for a second car,

taking them both downtown to the smelly station
and the questions and the words
statutory rape.
Was there penetration?
Yes, she said with scorn,
barely.
And her mama had to come and get her
and they told her at the police station and the hospital
to get Persephone some counseling
but she said yeah, meaning no
she said it was Persephone's fault
and anyway she'd just talk about her mama if she went to counseling.
And all this was deeply depressing
so Persephone became a zombie for a while
in the realm of the dead, in the underworld
in a darkness darker than a white person can imagine.
Some time later, her mama says to Demeter with a smirk
Persephone done somethin, got somethin to tell you; she tell you?
No, says Demeter; so she asks Persephone
and the story comes out in a monotone, in parts and pieces
and her eyes are lidded and evasive her voice is flat, no affect
her face is swollen
Didn't bother me
Doesn't make any difference to me
I don't care
Demeter sees that there is no god here to help.
She travels down into herself
to look for this child, her child though not her biological child, and she screams into the underworld
IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT!
And the eyes open a little and the face turns toward her and they begin to talk
of justice
The report has already been made
and there will be a chance to haul his sorry, skinny ass to court
to testify against him
god though he is, barely.

And when that day comes
turns out he's 32, has 5 warrants out for his arrest
for criminal sexual conduct
and one for battering, the woman there with bruises and a broken finger
and they don't need Persephone's testimony
though they should have needed it, for her sake.
This is not the end, of course—
it's a seasonal myth
or maybe a myth of female initiation by rape
teaching proper submission to male control
teaching her place in life—
and they have lots of travelling
up and down, to do.
She's swallowed those pretty red seeds
tiny, slimey, tart
and Hades' back home, a mouse of a god released on his own recognizance.
So back down to the dark bus stops, alley short cuts,
the reckless thought of herself as trash.
She checks 'sexually active' because she was—
well, not active, sexually passive
but there's no box for that.
I'm a ghetto girl,
pronouncing each T.
She's tricked by the narcissus, that flower of deception
'which Earth as bait grew for this girl
as a favor for Him Who Receives So Many
and with Zeus allowing it'
Hades is multiform
Now he has two part time jobs, stocking and computers
and says he's still in school though he's been sick
with a heart problem, coughing up blood and fainting on the job,
so hasn't been to school since he got sick, a month or so ago
He phones at 3 am that he's sitting here and there's one bullet in the gun,
just one—you want I pull the trigger? It be your fault.
What's pre-calc, what's To Kill a Mockingbird, after a phonecall like this?

Down into the deep absence of fathers and mothers
into that cold place where anger is smeared over everyone
that frozen realm of no one to trust
into the dark horror of a first pregnancy
lots of her friends are pregnant
and vague dreams of *everything* for her child
which include a father whose name is known and who is present
WIC, food stamps, state aid
How's everything? *Fine.*
I don't want your help, your money, your advice, your nagging
It's boring, it gets on my nerves.
Demeter hesitates, she loses heart: who am I to search for her?
But rage overrides the hesitation, and a savage pain: more
weeping, wandering, searching.
Disguised as old, asexual, gnarled, and mortal
she asks all questions, accepts no distraction, no propitiation.
She will not rest or eat or sit by the fire.
And yes, she finds her again in the subterranean realm leads her back up
again to the surface of the world
Up here: to dreams of marriage to a different kind of god, non-abusive
up here where it's safe, in the field of flowers
where Persephone sits at the computer inventing her life
Persephone says she feels like doing cartwheels
in the aisle of the market when she gets her first job
Persephone is gentle with the cats and sings in the kitchen
Her delight leaps as the fetus leaps on the ultrasound
She develops many skills, she plans to finish highschool
She won't let this stop her
But then those bloody seeds again
the rusted Buick turns the corner again
He'll help me, but after the baby comes
I don't want to ask him
He loves me I love him
Why doesn't he say he loves me
Why does he say you aren't *my wife*
get the fuck out of my face
And Demeter, you're too hard to live with,
demand too much, should cut me some slack.
I was warned against you.

There are moments of swift, ambiguous violence, tears, the slamming of doors, cold silence
the stigma's whirlpool
she was a pretty little thing, she didn't stand a chance
her culture doomed her
what did you expect
Something snaps in Demeter
She's sick of all this up and down,
these searchings and findings by torchlight, these reunions, these forgivings
tired of mourning and hunting her daughter and her brother
tired of looking at the seasons in this way
tired of looking at gender, and race, and god this way
So she begins to travel—now this is a trip—
to the heart of the myth,
the tangled sweet and sour heart of the myth
to the parts that make no sense to her
to explode it, expose it
to lead us all out
She yells into the murky gloom:
WHAT'S THIS SHIT ABOUT POMEGRANATE SEEDS?
Persephone can barely hear her but she does hear her
and you do too, Hades, don't you you do too
if barely

> The religious issues here are very complicated ones, having to do with the nature of the final vision in the celebration of the mysteries, and with the precise meaning of 'blessedness' in early Greek thought. Whole books (e.g., Deichgräber, *Eleusinische Frömmigkeit*) have been written on the subject, which obviously does not admit of summary treatment. In any case, it is unnecessary for our purposes. (Marylin Arthur, 'Politics and Pomegranates: An Interpretation of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter', *Arethusa* 10 [1977], p. 32)

> Having tasted it, she has crossed a barrier from which there can be no turning back, and nothing Demeter can do will ever make her the same again… As a result of her initiation, she changes status—from girl to woman, and in the process her very being is transformed as she becomes fertile, productive, experienced, and whole… [T]he entire world is remade as a result of her initiation. Threats of chaos and desolation are warded off, the gifts of civilization come into being, the fruits of the earth spring forth with renewed abundance, and the rhythm of the seasons is established. (Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981], pp. 85, 90)

Part IV

Magdalene Christianity

Reading from This Place

Reading from Detroit in this time is reading embedded in experience of the deep and tangled structures of racism, sexism, poverty, classism, colonialism, and of the despair and courage displayed by those whom these structures have enmeshed. Despite my early efforts to get a 'better' job, I am lucky to teach in a non-elite, richly diverse classroom Virginia Woolf would approve of, where some—many—of our students are poor (or the nearly poor, the recently poor) with whom I try to be a co-learner in the effort to demystify strategies of oppression like 'whiteness', and to recognize the powers of resistance… Standing again at Golgotha in Detroit is a challenge not to turn away from suffering or from the body. It demands a resurrection faith that does not make the suffering all right, does not dull injustice, does not de-sensitize compassion or fear of death; rather it leads to action in spite of. Mary Magdalene of the Christian Testament is the one who stands by the dying, wrongfully accused, executed; she fails to anoint at any empty tomb of the disappeared. Simply there, she becomes the place, the location, not just the symbol of, the God who is thought to abandon, but does not abandon… Each of us wishes for one like the Magdalene to go down with us into death, to stay with us to the end. I say this with cancer on my mind…[1]

1. From *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 15.

GIMPLE IN THE YARD

Vayyar' 'Elohim 'et-kol-'asher 'asah vehinneh-tov me'od (Gen. 1.31)

In the illness that looked to be his last but wasn't,
Gimple went into the yard.

Frail—four days without food
in pain from the poisons in his stomach
and the black stool coiling
bleary eyed with ripe blue cataracts
unsteady, moving cautiously.

He sees something in the empty yard.

Not cat or possum or coon
not bird
not luscious autumn light

He sees the empty yard
He sees something I cannot see
He looks in wonder.

This is the yard where his gravestone will lie
with its inscription
'I wandered through the whole world,
and good people took care of me.'

Like gentle Adam maybe;
no, like Elohim
he sees something for the first time
something in the light, in the yard

Something interesting

Something good

Something very good.

10

Mary Magdalene as Mara, Honorable Teacher

My contribution to this discussion of the Talpiot Tomb comes from the field of biblical studies, a field which employs historical-critical and literary-critical analyses in an effort to reconstruct aspects of history embedded in biblical texts, the perspectives of biblical writers in constructing the texts, and to identify their use of earlier sources.[1] My interpretative framework and my presuppositions are feminist. Within this framework, it is possible to place women as agents at the center of historiography, and to understand them as creators as well as bearers of meaning—a point that is extremely important for analysis of the role of Mary Magdalene. Feminist analysis is grounded in wo/men's experience of oppression, as well as their historical agency: that is, in wo/men's participation in and contribution to struggles for justice. Our educated assumption is that centuries of androcentric recounting, stereotyping, and interpretation have confused, diminished, and all but erased the presence of wo/men and silenced their voices, a process that continues to occur, even at learned conferences such as this. Feminist scholars attempt to read gaps and slippages in the texts, to map out ancient and contemporary strategies of suppression and resistance in an attempt to uncover wo/men's history, making for a fuller reading of human history. We are rightly suspicious of the received records, and trained in the use of historically grounded imagination. Feminist studies (of literature, law, psychology, politics, medicine, domestic violence, and any other subject) are part of our phase of the women's movement. This work is undertaken in order to empower social change and liberation.

1. This essay originated as a presentation at the conference 'Jewish Views of the After Life and Burial Practices in Second Temple Judaism: Evaluating the Talpiot Tomb in Context' (13–16 January 2008, in Mishkenot Sha'ananim in Jerusalem), the Third Princeton Symposium on Judaism and Christian Origins.

The massive body of scholarship on the search for the historical Jesus and Christian origins is over two hundred years old; feminist, historical scholarship on women of this period is only in its second generation. The latter has not developed different methods but often assesses differently the data gleaned from the use of traditional methods. Take the case of Mary Magdalene's sevenfold demonic possession (Lk. 8.2). John Meier, employing the criteria of embarrassment and of coherence, thinks there is a historical foundation in the report that Jesus performed an exorcism on her. But whose embarrassment? We can suppose the prominence of a flawed female figure was *less* embarrassing to those who opposed her and her memory than an unflawed female, especially when that flaw, even if healed, connotes madness, deviant behavior, and heresy. I am suspicious of Luke, who may present her exorcism as a means of integrating her into the patriarchal order and tarnishing her memory.

Unfortunately, in my experience, feminist scholarship by men and women in biblical studies is still of little or no interest to many male (and some female) scholars; it is not deemed important or necessary for many of them to know our work and engage in serious discussion with it—yet. Perhaps this is due to the largely conservative and patriarchal nature of religion in general. While claiming that the ossuary that may be associated with Mary Magdalene is of great importance, some scholars at this conference with no background in Magdalene studies call her 'an enigma' and hold in error that the significant evidence we have about her is not in the first-century canonical Gospels but is second century and later. I disagree.

Reconstructing a Historical Mary Magdalene

I propose that there are a number of things we can claim about Mary Magdalene, historically, and on the basis of first-century CE evidence. She was a Jewish woman, from the Galilean town of Magdala (Migdal), known for its salted fish trade. She was a member of the *basileia tou theou* (reign of God) movement associated with Jesus of Nazareth, a movement many feminist scholars have characterized as one of struggling egalitarianism. By egalitarianism I do not mean the achieved ideal of a social organization that is without sexism, without structures and ideologies of domination, without traditional division of labor. I also do not mean an ideal or a platform of gender equality that is clearly perceived and articulated by leaders or followers in the movement, or identical with the feminist ideals taking shape in our own

time. But I also do not mean a society or ideology that ignores all issues and implications of what we call gender or that is compatible with virulent misogyny, sexism, and condescension. I do mean a social reality characterized by the attempts of women and men to live and work together for a common goal or goals as equals, in a variety of changing circumstances, and with a range of understandings and range of success and lack of success. In a religious sense, what characterizes egalitarianism is the actual attempt to fully incarnate or embody certain beliefs: to take them seriously enough to act on them, such as the belief that all have equal access to salvation, or that all are created in the image of God. These beliefs are deeply embedded in Judaism, and this egalitarianism is a possibility within Judaism. The movement Mary Magdalene belonged to was one of 'shared prophecy', focused on the *basileia* of God, and not on Jesus.

Mary Magdalene traveled with the group, not in a position of (domestic) service and patronage, an idea we owe to Luke who, in his Gospel and in Acts, highlights women in this role, even as he obscures women in prophetic roles. Participation would have involved learning, studying, working together. I judge it likely that she, with other women, was present at Jesus' crucifixion and burial, returned to his tomb or burial place and found it empty. In line with developing Jewish apocalyptic/wisdom belief and praxis, Elijah traditions, and the earliest teaching within the movement about the Human One's (Son of Man's) suffering and resurrection (a figure I see as at some levels corporate), she believed Jesus to be resurrected, vindicated. She communicated that belief and others developed it. She was therefore likely a major source of information about the movement and Jesus' death, and an originator of the Christian resurrection faith.

We know nothing of her education, her age, her looks, previous occupation. There is no indication at all that she was a prostitute, a legend that arose in Western Christianity as the result of the conflation of texts like Luke 7 (an unnamed 'woman of the city, a sinner' who weeps at Jesus' feet) and John 8 (the near-stoning of a woman accused of adultery). We know nothing of her family, her relationship with others, sexual orientation or practice, health, economic status, reasons for joining the movement; there is no narrative of her call, nor that of any other woman. There are no teachings or actions in the ministry period associated with her. She is named, as are some other women, without reference to father, son, or husband. Analysis of canonical materials indicates that her importance was early on blurred, obscured, and probably contested. I give that opposition historical

weight. We have only late legends about her life after the resurrection, her travels, her work, her death, and burial.

Mary Magdalene and Jesus

Were the historical Mary Magdalene and Jesus married and/or parents of a son? Married, I think probably not. I have argued Jesus was possibly a *mamzer* (conceived in the period between betrothal and hometaking, with Joseph not *the* father) and forbidden marriage within Israel to the tenth generation (Deut. 23.3). If the reading on one of the Talpiot tomb ossuaries is Yeshua bar Yehosef, this does not disprove it being a reference to Jesus of Nazareth, nor does it disprove the illegitimacy reading of the infancy narratives, since Joseph was reputed to be his father (Lk. 3.23: he was 'the son [as was supposed] of Joseph'). Reducing Mary Magdalene to the role of 'Mrs Jesus' (Crossan's term) distracts from her important role in the formation of Christianity and is a good example of using a woman to think about a man (in this case, to present Jesus as a 'real' man and a heterosexual male). Note that her legendary designations whore / lover / wife are all designations with respect to men; they reduce the woman to her biological functions and call to mind Virginia Woolf's question of why romantic love is 'the only possible interpreter' of a woman of power. There is simply no evidence of a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and as far as I can see no credible reasons for keeping a marriage secret. '*The DaVinci Code* syndrome' with regard to Mary Magdalene amounts to the reduction of her to the Holy Grail, a vessel, a womb.

The erotic elements in John 20 (which has echoes of the Song of Songs) and in several apocryphal texts (especially the *Gospel of Philip*) do signal love, but they are ambiguous about its nature. Pagels has argued that these elements have to do with mystical understanding and connection, and if sexual activity also, that that aspect is *intentionally* ambiguous.[2] The Valentinian *Gospel of Philip* 32, 63.33-35 is a tantalizingly corrupt passage: 'And the companion *(koinōnos)* of the [Lord was] Mary Magdalene… [He loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth].' The rest of the disciples ask Jesus, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?' The Savior answers, 'Why do I not love you like her?' (55). The implied

2. Elaine Pagels, 'The "Mystery of Marriage" in the Gospel of Philip Revisited', in *The Future of Early Christianity* (ed. Birger Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 442-54.

answer to both questions seems to be that Mary Magdalene is loved because she is not blind but sees the light (64.5-9). That is, the answer has to do with insight and with spiritual worth, undercutting the competitiveness. The term *koinōnos* has a wide range of meanings in the Bible and elsewhere.[3]

The lack of DNA connection between bone residue found in the Yeshua bar Yehoseph ossuary and one attributed by some to Mary Magdalene is no indication of marital status. Personally, I hope that Jesus and Mary Magdalene both had healthy sexual lives, with each other or with others, if they so chose. They could have been parents of a son. But we need to remember that ascetics were known in Judaism of the period: the Therapeutae, some Essenes, John the Baptist, Paul.

A Family Tomb?

The idea that the Talpiot tomb belongs to the dynasty of Jesus or Jesus' family or clan runs counter, in my opinion, to understandings of this movement's focus on 'family of God' as precisely *not* a biological reality: 'And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you". And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother"' (Mk 3.31-35; see parallels in Mt. 12.46-50 and Lk. 8.19-21; elsewhere see Jn 7.5: 'Even his brothers did not believe in him'; Mt. 4.9, a saying of John the Baptist: 'Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham'). Even though some members of his family came over into the movement after his death, it would seem a supreme irony for the bones of Jesus to be contained in a tomb whose very nature (dynasty, family) ran counter to a powerful aspect of his message—but, then, of course, stranger things have happened to Jesus in Christian history.

If we think of the Talpiot tomb as the tomb of early and important members of the movement, rather than the family of Jesus, we can put aside (1) the objection that Jesus' family could not afford a rock-hewn tomb (the tomb would have been donated by wealthy member[s] of the movement), and (2) the objection that his tomb would more likely

3. See Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 152-55.

have been in the Galilee, and (3) DNA analysis. We can also think of the ossuary inscriptions Matya, Marya, and Jose in this broader way. There is a Matthew among the Twelve (Mt. 9.9, called Levi in Mk 2.14 and Lk. 5.27). Many Marys appear in the Gospels besides the mother of Jesus: Mary of Bethany (Jn 11; 12; Lk. 10.38-42), Mary the wife of Clopas (Jn 19.25), Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Joses) (Mk 15.40; Mt. 27.56; Lk. 24.10). The Jose mentioned here is not the same person as the brother of Jesus in Mk 6.3.

I privilege the moment at the empty tomb as a catalyst or trigger of Mary Magdalene's claim that Jesus had been raised. Given the range of contemporary Jewish beliefs, 'resurrection' would be ultimately compatible with a mysteriously empty tomb, a corpse removed by followers or stolen by enemies, a mix-up (corpse is in another grave), a never-found corpse/bones. It would be compatible with a body translated/exalted to the heavens. It would be compatible also with a subsequently found corpse/bones, and eventual burial in an ossuary. Many, perhaps most, Christians are not aware of the range of beliefs about resurrection in Jesus' time; so many hold the belief that resurrection *must* have entailed an empty tomb, that resurrection *must* have entailed the reanimation or standing-up-again of the dead body, as in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* where Jesus, with light shining through the holes in his body, walks forward. We can speculate that the place revered as the Holy Sepulcher may have been the first burial site, provided by Joseph of Arimathea on behalf of the Sanhedrin; this would be the 'empty tomb'. Then there may have been a secondary burial at Talpiot, and then the bones of Jesus put there in an ossuary. So Talpiot would not be the Christian Testament's tomb site.

Many intriguing questions arise from investigation of the Talpiot tomb, such as the following: Were there other tombs that were not family tombs? I am thinking here of Qumran, of the Jewish catacombs in Rome, of the question of how the Therapeutae may have buried their members. Did the early Christians who remained in Jerusalem until the war of 66–70 CE abandon or lose the memory of this tomb and its location? Or if we look for mention in Jewish-Christian materials, especially in reference to the region of the Transjordan, might we find something of the memory that has been overlooked or misunderstood? Is there any relation to other tombs in the Talpiot region? If the bones become available for study, we would certainly learn much from them, as from the bones of the Jehohanan found at Givat ha-Mitvar.

Mary Magdalene and the Ossuary Inscription

I want to focus now on the most elaborate ossuary, the only one with an inscription in Greek. Its inscription has been read in a variety of ways: (1) *Mariamenou (e) Mara*: of *Mariamene* who is (also called) *Mara*. In this case the name is the genitive *Mariamenou*, a diminutive of *Mariamene*, one of the many variants of the name *Miriam/ Mariam/ Mariame*. The variant on this ossuary was further contracted to *Mariamne*, which was explicitly equated with *Marianne* (so Rahmani, who understood *Mara* to be a contraction of Martha, the second name or double name of this person). (2) *Mariame kai Mara* = *Mariame* and *Mara*, two persons (so Pfann; the second name a shortened form of the Aramaic name Martha[4]). (3) *Mariam e kai* (or *Mariame kai*) *Mara*: Mary who is called Mara, the Master, a title. Note that there is really no English equivalent for the feminine of the Aramaic title *Mar*, a prophetic title (*Mar* Elijah, *Mar* Elisha, *Maranatha*). 'Honorable lady', 'Lordess', 'mistress', 'lady' will not do. 'Honorable Teacher' is better. If there are two scribal hands here, the title may have been added later. Epigraphers may never agree on a correct reading of the inscription (which in *any* reading can refer to Mary the Master). Nor may they agree on the significance of the fact that it is in Greek: if this is the ossuary of Mary Magdalene, is the Greek due to the sophistication of her hometown, Magdala, or her own sophistication, or travels, or influence among Greek speakers? Or is it some recognition of the breadth of her influence? The flourish under the name makes some sort of statement, most likely a sign of great respect.

Note also that the name Mary is especially slippery, having many forms. Marianne was Herod's Hasmonean wife, murdered in the 20s CE; her name was taken by Israelites in honor of her Hasmonean heritage, in sympathy. Josephus calls the prophet Miriam *Mariamne*. It seems to me that Mary Magdalene could have been known also to some as *Mariamne* for either of these reasons—opposition to Rome or prophetic stature. In later works, Mary Magdalene is called *Mariham* in the *Gospel of Thomas* and in *Pistis Sophia* IV. She is called *Mariamne* in the Greek fragment of the *Gospel of Mary* (earlier than the Coptic). In *Pistis Sophia* she is usually called Maria, sometimes *Mariamne*, and once of Magdala. She is Mary Magdalene in the *Gospel of Peter*, *Mariahamme*

4. S.J. Pfann, 'Mary Magdalene Has Left the Rooms: A Suggested New Reading of Ossuary CJO 701', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 69 (2006), pp. 130 -31.

in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*; in the *Dialogue of the Savior* she is sometimes *Marihamme*, sometimes *Mariham*. In the Manichaean Psalm Book she is called *Marihama* (the last letter is uncertain) and *Marihamme*. In the *Acts of Philip* she is *Mariamne*, *Mariamme*, or Maria the Magdalene. Hippolytus calls her *Mariamme* (so also Origen) and *Mariamnee*. As early as the first century CE (traditions in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Mary*, Josephus), we also find variety.

I propose that (1) the Talpiot tomb is not a family or dynastic tomb, and (2) this ossuary inscription does not refer to two individuals, nor does it refer to two personal names of one individual. Rather, I think the ossuary refers to a Mary who is called Mara, understood as a title, Master, Honorable Teacher. A. Feuerverger assumed that this 'is a highly appropriate appellation for Mary Magdalene', and I agree. He knows that 'the assumption is contentious and drives the outcome of his computations substantially'.[5] The following analysis provides a literary and sociological context for this reading of Mary the Master.

If Mary Magdalene were important only for her presence at Jesus' crucifixion, and her claim that she discovered his tomb empty and received revelation about his afterlife—and I have argued that these elements can be regarded as historical—this would be enough to secure for her in some circles the title *Mara*. That is, there is good first-century support for this title being appropriate for her. There is also reason to consider her the founder of Christianity, if one likes such contentious titles.

Her role in each of the canonical Gospels, however, is diminished by subsequent focus on the male disciples, on appearances to them as climactic events, and their commissioning. She and the other women are reduced to, in Crossan's phrases, 'a secretarial role' delivering information to the males, who have an 'executive role'.[6]

We can say more about the historical importance of Mary Magdalene. There are traditions of a first appearance (protophany) of the risen Jesus to her in Matthew 28 and John 20, which have at least eighteen points of contact, indicating a pre-Johannine, pre-Matthean tradition. Further, I think John may be using a source which he does not fully use; it has been truncated. Sarah Coakley asks, what was it about Mary Magdalene's testimony that was both formative and yet in

5. A. Feuerverger, 'Statistical Analysis of Archaological Find', *The Annals of Applied Statistics* (2008), pp. 84-90.

6. John D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 560.

need of being downplayed?[7] In John 20, I see fragments of a claim that Mary Magdalene was seen as a successor of Jesus.

I read this story of the appearance of the risen Jesus to her at the tomb as containing a subtext of allusions to 2 Kings 2: the 'taking' of Elijah in a whirlwind and the witnessing of his ascent by Elisha. Elisha knows that his master is going to be taken from him; he refuses to leave Elijah as they travel from Gilgal to the Jordan. Elisha insists, 'I will not forsake you'. The witnessing of Elijah's ascent is the condition upon which, or assurance, or sign that what Elisha asks his master—to inherit a double share of his spirit—will be granted him by God. 'Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you". Elisha said, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit". He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not". As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.' Elisha cries out, 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen'. He then picks up the mantle of Elijah, crosses the Jordan, and the company of prophets declares, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha'. They bow to the ground before him.

The witnessing of ascent is powerful stuff biblically and post-biblically. The witness is the successor of the one who ascends; Elisha goes on to fulfill the roles given to Elijah. I see the 'do not hold me' (Jesus to Mary Magdalene) as evoking Elisha's attempts to hold onto his master who will be taken from him. Mary Magdalene is told to tell the disciples that he said to her, 'I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God'. He is, that is, in the process of ascending and she is witnessing this. John 20 is like a palimpsest overwriting 2 Kings 2 and applied to Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The connections are not so much verbal (except for references to seeing and 'I am ascending') as in terms of the action and emotion in the texts.

When I presented something of this reading of John 20 at a Society of Biblical Literature meeting, one of the respondents said, 'I can see how I can read the text in the way you're proposing, but I don't see why I should'. Well, I think we should at least try—in order to get at more accurate assessments of the gender roles in early christianities.

7. Sarah Coakley, 'Response' to W.P. Alston's 'Biblical Criticism and the Resurrection', in *The Resurrection* (ed. S.T. David; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 189-90.

The history of the interpretation of John 20 is riddled with misogyny: it stresses Mary's ignorance, her carnal mentality, and the strange incompleteness and unimportance of what she is said to experience.

In the *Testament of Job*, his three daughters witness their father's ascent in the chariots of the spirit and are themselves empowered to share in the kingdom, ecstatically singing hymns in the language of the angels (see also the *Testament of Adam and Eve*). These are examples of women witnessing ascent in the context of the *merkabah* (chariot) mysticism tradition, which I think we are discovering was very significant in some of the earliest forms of Christianity.

In any work that would have ended with the scene in John 20, Mary Magdalene would be the only guarantor of the vindication of Jesus, and v. 17, his final message. We can imagine the narrative continuing with a series of events consolidating Mary Magdalene's authority (the conferring of the Holy Spirit on her; the recognition and rejoicing of the disciples). But John's narrative does not continue in this way. Instead we have a silence about her that dismantles her authority and makes her report superfluous and abortive. The Elijah–Elisha tradition and its spirit-giving is truncated and distorted: Mary is not said to receive the spirit of Jesus, but instead that spirit is given in the next chapter to the male disciples. She is not said to fulfill the duties of Jesus, and not seen as his prophetic successor. There is no response at all to her report to the disciples. Her vision is discounted in chap. 21's numbering of the appearances of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple is said to be the first to believe (at the tomb) and Peter receives commission; she disappears from the story.

But if this tradition was truncated and all but obscured in the canon, it was developed in apocryphal works. In the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, she stands up as comforter, encourager, and replacement for Jesus after he has departed. Her leadership role is accepted until Peter asks her to tell him and the others what she had learned from Jesus, which they have not heard. She tells of a vision she had of Jesus, and of his description of his ascent past the adversaries. Her account is met with anger and disbelief, and awareness of its implications on the part of Peter and Andrew: 'Would Jesus have spoken secretly to a woman and not to us? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did her prefer her to us?' They reject her testimony but Levi defends her: 'If the savior considered her to be worthy, who are you [Peter] to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly' (9.30–10.14). This portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a visionary, a favorite disciple, a beloved one praised for her great understanding appears

in many other works such as the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *First Apocalypse of James*, and the Manichaean Psalm Book, as mentioned above.

Conclusion

Given the central importance of Mary Magdalene in the canonical Gospels, my reading of John 20 as indicating she is a successor of Jesus and inheritor of his Spirit, and her importance and leadership in so many later apocryphal works (although her leadership is always contested) suggests that it is possible, even likely, that some did honor Mary Magdalene as Mara. To accept this as a possibility is to recognize that our understanding of movements within the early decades of what became Christianity must be expanded. I have argued that even if we may not be able precisely to locate its center(s), we can, and should, imagine what I call Magdalene Christianity, a movement or set of movements that continued a trajectory rooted in the first century, that extended to the fourth century and beyond, and in which came into existence on the basis of wo/men's insight, revelation, and leadership. I am using the name of Mary Magdalene, which appears in the canon only in the Gospels (not in Paul, nor in Acts) to refer to something that was unnamed, and I am associating it with the testimony of this specific named woman, testimony understood as central to certain understandings of the resurrection and as rooted in Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions. Examination of the opposition to Magdalene Christianity posed by Petrine, Pauline, Jamesian, and other traditions and versions will eventually give a fuller picture of the origins of Christianity, in particular of its struggles regarding egalitarianism and conflict surrounding specific theological metaphors (Woman Wisdom; a corporate Son of Man or Human One), rites (baptism), and beliefs (resurrection experienced in the present and involving interconnectedness). In my opinion, this may have been a form of Christianity that found no contradiction in proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus while knowing of his burial site and ossuary in Jerusalem.

This, then, is what I am imagining. The Talpiot tomb and the ossuary that can be read as 'Mary the Master' bring us in touch with physical evidence of this form of earliest Christianity. The bones of the honored woman and the bones of others important in the beginning were gathered by someone or some group in a rock-hewn tomb in Jerusalem. Its existence and location were forgotten or wiped out of historical memory, perhaps in some way connected to the fleeing of

some Christians to Pella during the war of 66–70 CE, according to Eusebius. What did remain in memory, however, or resurged was a traditional location of what had been the *empty* tomb, the place of revelation to Mary Magdalene.

11

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY*

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza teaches us to break scholarly stereotypes and boundaries: between writer/reader and scholar/literary theoretician; between the activist and the thinker; between the scholar or religion and the religious/spiritual person; between the believer and agnostic/atheist. I offer this essay in the hope that it might follow her lead and be of use not only to scholars but to wo/men[1] changing religion and politics in the twenty-first century.

My contribution here expands and revises three pages in my book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*,[2] in which I argued that even if we may not be able precisely to locate its center(s), or identify all its leaders, we can imagine what I call Magdalene Christianity, a movement or set of movements that continued, from the first century to the fourth and beyond, to exist and create on the basis of wo/men's insight, revelation, and leadership. In using the name of Mary Magdalene, which appears in the canon only in the Gospels, I am giving a name to something that was unnamed and associating it with the testimony of this specific named woman, testimony understood as central to the resurrection faith and as rooted in Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom traditions. Examination of the opposition to Magdalene Christianity posed by Petrine, Pauline, and perhaps Jamesian and other traditions and versions will eventually give a fuller picture of the origins of Christianity, in particular of its struggles regarding egalitarianism.

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1. Schüssler Fiorenza's term for all women and oppressed and marginalized men (*Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* [New York: Continuum, 1994], p. 191 n. 1).

2. Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 347-49.

By egalitarianism I do not mean the achieved ideal of a social organization that is without sexism, structures, and ideologies of domination, blindspots, and failures. I also do not mean an ideal that is clearly perceived by leaders or followers, or identical to the feminist ideals taking shape in our own time. Nor do I mean a society or ideology that ignores all issues of gender or is compatible with virulent misogyny and sexism. I mean rather a social reality characterized by the attempts of men and women to live and work together for a common goal as equals, in a variety of changing circumstances and understandings. In the religious sense, what characterizes egalitarianism is the attempt actually and fully to 'incarnate' or embody certain beliefs such as the belief that all have equal access to salvation, that all are created in the image of God.

This is not what some have called the myth of Christian origins, the assumption that there was an original moment of perfect egalitarianism, from which subsequent history is a 'fall'.[3] Nor is it a version of the myth of matriarchal origins, which posits a woman-centered, goddess-centered culture of peace and harmony destroyed by 'patriarchy'. Cynthia Eller shows that there is *dis*confirming evidence of such a culture, that is, evidence of conflict and of a division of labor that was later associated with disproportionate value given to men's labors. There is also simple absence of proof positive, that is, evidence that the original 'matriarchal' society was utterly different from all that came after; no reason to expect that it would be so different; and no compelling explanation of why things changed drastically. Moreover, Eller criticizes such thinking as embedded in an un-liberating theory of sex and gender that exaggerates differences between women and men, attributing complementary, (only) positive, nurturing characteristics to women.[4] Eller nevertheless knows that 'matriarchal' myth is held up by things stronger than archaeological or historical evidence: by passionate hope and religious faith.

> [I]n theory, little can be said against the propriety of imagining a time—prehistoric if necessary—when women were treated well rather than badly, with respect rather than condescension or outright hatred. Envisioning a

3. See Kathleen E. Corley, 'Feminist Myths of Christian Origins', in *Reimagining Christian Origins* (ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 51-67; Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002).

4. Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

> feminist future is arguably a necessary task. And insofar as envisioning a feminist past helps accomplish this—as it clearly does for many people—it would seem to have obvious merit.

It provides hope that male dominance can be ended, and it empowers women to imagine themselves as capable of leadership, autonomy, and creativity. But the problems and dangers, as Eller sees them, undercut the benefits. Origin theories tend to reduce historically specific facts and values to timeless archetypes, to offer solutions tailored not to specific cultural environments but to a totalizing image of 'patriarchy', to project onto the past a vision of the world as it ought to be, to be convincing only to those who already ardently hope it is true, to trap women in archetypes of the Great Good Mother, and to create nostalgia for the lost past which is usually escapist rather than functional. These are staples 'of right-wing antifeminist rhetoric'. 'Myth is not history capable of teaching us how to avoid past mistakes.'[5]

The reconstruction of moments and phases of struggle that are proposed here is not about the perfection of a mythical time. Nor is it about the perfection of a mythical Jesus' attitudes and actions. Nor is it about an egalitarianism that came from nowhere, flashed into history, and was ended. Its roots are in Judaism's egalitarian impulses, and it is submerged in later history, but not ended. Nor is this reconstruction an overly optimistic invention of the past, wishful thinking based on a distortion of the evidence. Although there is healthy disagreement over the interpretation of certain texts, that disagreement has led to reassessment and sharper interpretation, imagination grounded in sober historical assessment. The claim is not that early Christianity and the Judaism from which it sprang and within which it took shape were not patriarchal or kyriarchal. The claim is that there were egalitarian movements struggling within—movements in which male domination was not total and women were active participants, with roles in creating some traditions that later centuries inherited. This is very different from projecting an ideal back into the past, and very different from nostalgic escapism. Evidence of women's leadership in early Christianity does not draw on stereotypical, archetypal ideals of women; it is accompanied always by evidence of opposition to women's leadership and multiple strategies for suppressing it. Knowledge of this history can help us imagine a different future and take steps to secure it. In this short essay, I make some broad speculations

5. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, pp. 182, 63, 185.

that cry out to be supported or challenged by detailed exegesis—thus the many maybes, might-bes, might-have-beens, perhapses, which indicate that I do not want my imagination cut free of evidence (as well as indicating that I see my historical reconstruction as tentative, possible, at the most probable). My frustration lies here in the need to wrestle this article and cut it to fit the present format, where it is only a sketch.

In my opinion, without the dimension of Magdalene Christianity, conflicts in the canonical epistles, within the Gospels themselves, and in the Apocrypha, including some so-called gnostic materials, make less sense. Just as important, with an exploration of Magdalene Christianity, aspects of concepts and beliefs, such as the 'Human One' (the Son of Man), are made more multidimensional and somewhat more comprehensible. The apocryphal materials function as a lens through which to view women and gender roles in the earlier *basileia* movements. Claims made for early egalitarianism and the prominence of women are more possible, even more plausible or probable, seen through that lens. Our understanding of the conflict and variety that Walter Bauer argued for in early Christianity and its documents[6] is deepened by this complexity.

The value this may have for present-day reform movements can be likened to, for example, the value that the uncovered memory of women healers has for the medical profession: contemporary medicine would change without this memory; but the past is part of the profession, and change is empowered and corrected by it. The future does not rest on, nor is it determined by, historical precedent. But we have an obligation to know and honor the past, to retrieve the memory of wo/men's struggle and agency.

The struggle for egalitarianism is situated in several contexts: (1) within individual communities, and in their different stages, (2) among them, in their efforts to work out what is later called orthodox and heretical; inside and outside, and (3) with outsiders like Celsus, who ridiculed the resurrection faith as based on the witness of 'a hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery' (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.55). (4) The struggle is situated also in later history and our own time, in multiple dimensions. Trying to give shape to what has been lost in the

6. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971; original edn 1934).

past is inextricably linked to contemporary enterprises, but recognition of this link does not necessitate a fall into a historicism or anti-historicism, oversimplification, or impatience with ambiguity, in the promotion of any particular agenda. 'The legacy of history as history retains its ability to affect everyday lives by determining the weight of the past'.[7] The weight of the particular past examined here is both ballast and burden, inspiring and depressing.

The figure of Mary Magdalene brings this past into focus. With growing popular awareness of the distortion of her image into repentant whore, and of correction of that distortion, she has been reinvented as a symbol for church reform: for example, for the ordination of Roman Catholic women, and not just for ordination.[8] This is an instance in which feminist historical criticism—diluted or pure—is getting out of the seminary and university into the workshop and discussion group and reading club and activist movements of wo/men. This scholarship, both a vehicle and a site for education,[9] involves transforming, transgressing, translating the tradition, and challenging fundamentalism. The harlotization, demonization, and taming of Mary Magdalene, and her rehabilitation, have parallels with the fate of Joan of Arc and a multitude of women, in their histories and representations. 'The burning of Joan was an attempt to deaden a great deal more than a young woman with pretensions of prophecy. It was also an attempt to: eradicate the nascent possibility of agency in a woman, of a possible weakness in the dominant discourse, requiring constant vigilance and cleansing, lest it be uncovered.'[10] These attempts at

7. Julia Epstein and Lori Hope Lefkovitz (eds.), *Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), editors' introduction, p. 1.

8. See 'Blueprint for Vatican III', *National Catholic Reporter* (3 May 2002), pp. 11-18.

9. See, for example, the pamphlet entitled 'Jesus and Women' by Christine Schenk, project coordinator of the Women in Church Leadership project (no date). The pamphlet makes available to churchgoers some of the results of contemporary scholarship. Unfortunately, it is flawed by anti-Judaic perspectives and misinformation. See A.-J. Levine, 'A Jewess More and/or Less', in *Judaism since Gender* (ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt; New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 149-57 (154): 'To see [the women of the Gospels] as rejecting Judaism (in this case characterized as oppressively patriarchal, misogynistic, repressive, spiritually dead, and so on) in favor of Jesus' (here not-'Jewish') movement, is an offense both to scholarly rigor and to Judaism'.

10. Francoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 97.

eradication (short-lived in Joan's case, centuries long in Mary Magdalene's) failed. Neither was domesticated by canonization or by scholarship. Feminist work moves through the legends, the art, the distortions, to traditions of the Jewish woman Mary Magdalene who witnessed the crucifixion and death of Jesus and the empty tomb, and whose claim is at the core of the resurrection faith. It reads the canonical texts differently in the light of the surprisingly many non-canonical texts in which she appears[11] and vice versa. Movement beyond the canon—in particular, familiarity with the *Gospel of Mary*—persuades me of an ancient and widespread tradition about Mary Magdalene which the canon also reflects.

Reading the canonical Gospels against the current of much contemporary male criticism in which the women at the tomb disappear from history and/or their 'role disappears from serious theological consideration, some feminist interpreters' educated assumption is that an androcentric telling and stereotypes in the past and present have garbled and diminished the contribution of women.[12] This directs us to read gaps and slippages in the texts, in order to map out ancient and contemporary strategies of suppression and resistance. Three of the major insights of feminist scholarship of the last twenty-five years are relevant to our discussion:

1. The *basileia* movement associated with Jesus can be historically reconstructed as one of several renewal or revitalization groups[13] within Judaism (such as the Therapeutae, John the Baptist's group, the Essenes of Qumran, Simon ben Giora's revolutionary movement). Membership could cross social, economic, cultural, and religious gulfs.

11. From Nag Hammadi, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *First Apocalypse of James*, *Gospel of Philip*, and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. Discovered previously, *Pistis Sophia*, *Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of Mary*, *Psalms of Heracleides*, *Epistula Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Church Order*, and *Acts of Philip*. I wonder if the figure of Mirai in Mandaean texts might also be a conflation of Mary the mother, of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (see Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Mandaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002]).

12. See Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), p. 5.

13. This is Amy-Jill Levine's term ('Women in the Q Communities and Traditions', in *Women and Christian Origins* (ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 150-70 (165).

2. These movements included women and men. They can be called 'egalitarian' in the sense of struggle, meaning that there was certainly a spectrum of perceptions and roles on the part of the participants. In the case of the movement associated with Jesus, some women functioned historically as what the Gospels call disciples, even though the texts do not give them this title. Or, it has been suggested[14] they may have been more than disciples: companions, even co-leaders. The paratactic structure of Lk. 8.1-3 can be read to mean that, along with Jesus, the Twelve and 'certain women' proclaimed and brought the good news of the kingdom.[15] A significant number of women are mentioned without reference to husbands or sons, a fact that may indicate that these relationships did not define the women, or else that the women were without these relationships.
3. The memory of important women was distorted by a wide variety of strategies and 'accidents', such as loss of the name; confusion and merging of identities; silencing through unreported speech, which means the erasure of their contribution; boxing the women characters into stereotypes and ideal types; nudging the reader's imagination in the direction of a negative evaluation of the women; and androcentric perspectives that put men at the center of events and women on the periphery (if in the picture at all). Even in the crucifixion/tomb narratives, the sheer number of verses in all four Gospels concerning the betrayal of Jesus by Peter

14. See, for example, Mary Rose D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing "Real" Women in Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene', in Kraemer and D'Angelo (eds.), *Women and Christian Origins*, pp. 105-28. Contrast Richard Bauckham's sketch of the historical Joanna (*Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 194-98), according to whom she was healed by Jesus, actively participated in *his* mission, preaching *as he did*, healing and exorcising *as he did*. 'She and the other women did nor scandalize the people by preaching in public places, but she would talk to the women where they gathered at the well or the market stalls, visit them in their homes, relating some of *Jesus*' parables and sayings' (emphases added). Only when he mentions healing does Bauckham draw on women's own abilities: 'She would be available for the people to bring the sick to her, as they were used to going to village women with healing skills' (p. 197).

15. So Quentin Quesnell, 'The Women at Luke's Supper', in *Political Issues in Luke–Acts* (ed. R.J. Cassidy and R. Scharper; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), pp. 59-79 (68). Bauckham (*Gospel Women*, p. 111) rightly finds this reading awkward and improbable in the context of Luke's writing, but does not explore the possibility that such grammatical ambiguities may be signs that Quesnell's reading is correct on a pre-Lukan level.

> far outweighs the number of verses paying attention to the women and signals how much more fascinating Peter was than they were, in this androcentric perspective.

With some minor differences, in the canonical Synoptic Gospels Mary Magdalene is mentioned most prominently among the ministering women who followed Jesus from Galilee, though there is no narrative of her call, nor any narrative in which she plays an active role or speaks or is spoken to in the ministry. In the company of other women, she is said to have stood by at the crucifixion and burial, and to have come to the tomb. In the Gospel of John, her first appearance—unexplained—is at the cross; she is not said to witness the burial, but to come later, alone, to the tomb. Garbling, distortion, invention, and loss—the signs of tension and importance—are evident in the telling of subsequent incidents at the tomb and afterwards, which involve the emptiness of the tomb and angelic revelations (all the Gospels), an appearance to her by the risen Jesus (only Matthew and John), a commission to tell (in all but Luke), and a telling (Luke, John, and the Markan Appendix, implied in Matthew; unbelieved in Luke and the Markan Appendix), or a silence (Mark). Mary Magdalene's testimony is trumped by appearances to male disciples and their commissioning in all the Gospels, except Mark, which ends at the empty tomb with the women fleeing and saying nothing to anyone out of fear. Mary Magdalene is not named as one to whom the risen Jesus appeared in Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15, nor is she named in Acts or in any other Christian Testament writing except the Gospels.

Apocryphal texts mention Mary Magdalene in ways that are strikingly different from the picture of her in the canonical Gospels, to say nothing of the ways in which legends about her developed in Western Christianity. Most intriguing is the *Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]*.[16] Out of nine elements, at least four of which appear in each one of the twelve non-canonical texts that mention her, I created a profile of the gnostic/apocryphal Mary: (1) Mary is prominent among the companions of Jesus; (2) she exists as a character, as a memory, in a textual world of androcentric language and patriarchal ideology;

16. Translation and commentary by Karen King in *The Complete Gospels* (ed. Robert J. Miller; Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), pp. 351-60. See also Esther A. de Boer, 'The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene' (diss., Theologische Universiteit van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland to Kampen, 2002).

(3) she speaks boldly; (4) she plays a leadership role vis-à-vis the male disciples; (5) she is a visionary; (6) she is praised for her superior understanding; (7) she is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus; (8) she is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male disciples; (9) she is defended. In only one text, the *Gospel of Mary*, are all nine points found.[17]

Of the many issues raised by the gnostic/apocryphal materials, four overlap: (1) How do non-canonical treatments of Mary Magdalene relate to the treatments in the Christian Testament, and to the historical woman Mary? (2) What does her apocryphal prominence indicate, if anything, of the roles of women in the communities in and for which the materials were produced? (3) Is there a relationship between her prominence in both canonical and non-canonical traditions and the canonical evidence in the letters of Paul of women's leadership in the earliest decades of Christianity? (4) Can a study of several elements (the historical women companions of Jesus; claims of their presence at cross and tomb and of a resurrection appearance to them; the women leaders mentioned in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and elsewhere; and the earliest controversies over the roles of women as documented in 1 Corinthians and the Pastorals) coalesce to help us begin to delineate aspects of an early egalitarian form of Christianity? It is these last two questions that interest me here. More specifically, are there dots connecting the Gospel women, Mary Magdalene, most prominent among them, the women prophets of Corinth, and Mary Magdalene in the *Gospel of Mary*?[18] What follows is an experiment in connecting the

17. See Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 127-203. The elements of this profile have different values and meaning from text to text, when seen in the context of each work as a whole, and then when seen in the context of the codex in which a work appears.

18. Karen King's description of the theology of the *Gospel of Mary* reads like a description of the theology of the Corinthian women prophets: 'It constructed Christian identity apart from social gender roles, sex and childbearing. It argued that direct access to God was possible for all through the Spirit. Leadership was exercised by chose who are more spiritually advanced by giving freely to all without claim to a fixed hierarchical ordering of power. Jesus was understood as a teacher and mediator of wisdom, not as a judge or ruler, and theological reflection centered on the risen Christ, not on suffering as atonement for sin' ('Canonization and Marginalization: Mary of Magdala', in *Women's Sacred Scriptures* [ed. Kwok Pui-lan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; London: SCM Press, 1998], pp. 29-36 [34]). See also Karen Torjesen, 'Wisdom, Christology, and Women Prophets', in *Jesus Then and Now* (ed. M. Meyer and C. Hughes; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), pp. 186-200.

dots I think do exist, and in describing the image that results when the dots are connected. It will be obvious how incomplete this work is.[19]

There is enough evidence of her prominence to make it reasonable to assume that Mary Magdalene was understood and presented by some in the first to fourth centuries as a model or, rather, an inspiration to which later women connected their claims of authority and leadership. Since some women in the Judaisms (and Greco-Roman religions) of the time were leaders, Mary Magdalene would not have functioned as a ground-breaking precedent, but as an empowering memory and unfinished work.

Putting together the bits and pieces of evidence, with acute awareness that there would have been critical differences with regard to time and socio-religious locations, we can attempt a sketch of Magdalene Christianity as an early alternative to Petrine and Pauline christianities. The sketch is speculative, tentative, explorative, searching, full of (untyped) question marks.

1. In Magdalene Christianity, women spoke boldly, with authority. Joanna Dewey argues that in the egalitarian Jesus movement women must have spoken as much as men. But their active role was reduced in the composition and selection of texts, a process in the hands of a small minority of literate men.[20] Surely, however, the speaking women companions of Jesus experienced androcentrism and efforts to silence them as well. The distinction between speaking in public and private contexts breaks down when we consider that women spoke in the synagogues and in Christian assemblies. In the list of names in Romans 16, almost half are the names of women well known in the community, known even to Paul, who had not visited Rome. The letters of Paul to the Corinthians clearly show that the church there in the fifties experienced conflict over the roles of women, especially with regard to their prophetic speech.[21] The speech of women was

19. For example, we need to explore further how 'resurrection' is understood by the Corinthian prophets and by the writer of the *Gospel of Mary*, and how this relates to (does this relate to?) elements in the canonical accounts of the empty tomb and appearances to the women.

20. Joanna Dewey, 'From Storytelling to Written Texts: The Loss of Early Christian Women's Voices', *BTB* 26 (1996), pp. 71-78.

21. See Elizabeth A. Castelli, 'Paul on Women and Gender', in Kraemer and D'Angelo (eds.), *Women and Christian Origins*, pp. 221-35 (224-26), on the questions raised by the references to women.

listened to, remembered, passed down, and developed by some. It was teaching.[22]

Paul is nastily sarcastic in the two rhetorical questions (1 Cor. 14.36) that follow his attempt to silence the Corinthian women prophets: 'Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached (*ē aph' hymōn ho logos tou theou exēlthen ē eis hymas monous katēntēsen*)?[23] The questions are the reverse image of the question of Miriam and Aaron: 'Has Yhwh spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?' (Num. 12.2). Paul is mocking the Corinthian women for their extraordinary confidence, their speaking as a source and exclusive destination of God's word. He insists on the contrary that his own preaching carried from Palestine and based on authentic tradition (1 Cor. 11.23-26; 15.3-11) has been the source of all they know and has reached many. He is the origin; they are merely receivers; it is a one-way communication.[24] Antoinette Clark Wire points out that the masculine plural of the word 'only' (*monous*) shows that Paul 'cannot mean the women of Corinth are claiming to be the font of wisdom against the men of Corinth. The context suggests an inclusive masculine in which the women addressed represent all those in Corinth who claim through prophecy to be an independent source and destination of God's word.'[25]

Did the Corinthian women prophets, by presenting themselves as the (or a) point of origin and the point of destination of God's word in Corinth, mean only that God speaks in their prophecy? Or was there also some connection between them and Galilean women as the origin of their resurrection faith? Others besides Paul brought information and teaching to Corinth, including the itinerant Jewish preacher Apollos (1 Cor. 1.12; 3.4-6, 22; 4.6; 16.12), who, according to Acts, was familiar with the baptism of John and was instructed by Priscilla

22. 'To prophesy in the *early* church was to engage in some type of inspired teaching—to communicate God's will directly in the midst of the assembly' (Margaret Y. MacDonald, 'Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul', in Kraemer and D'Angelo [eds.], *Women and Christian Origins*, pp. 199-220 [215]).

23. On discussions of the authenticity of 1 Cor. 14.33b-36, see MacDonald, 'Reading Real Women', pp. 216-17.

24. See Antoinette Wire, '1 Corinthians', in *Searching the Scriptures*. II. *A Feminist Commentary* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 153-95 (187, 160).

25. Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 33.

(Prisca) and Aquila (Acts 18.24-26; cf. 1 Cor. 16.19). Apollos may have had no personal contact with John the Baptist, but his knowledge may have come from disciples of John or from 'a fragmentary report of the events in Palestine' between 25 and 30 CE. L.D. Hurst thinks that Apollos's information probably included '*the* account of the resurrection' (emphasis mine) but 'seems not to have included any knowledge about what took place immediately after Jesus' ascension; i.e., the coming of the Holy Spirit.'[26] Let me modify this statement by suggesting that Apollos's information included an account of the resurrection stemming from the Galilean women, which had an understanding of the Spirit different from that of Paul (and Luke), and was probably indebted in some way to Prisca and Aquila.

If the Corinthian women prophets made any reference to Mary Magdalene and the other women, to the story of the empty tomb, and the appearance to the women, then the absence of reference to these by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 may be pointed, intended to undercut them. Wire thinks Paul's closed list, ending with himself, omitted mention of Mary Magdalene and other women probably in order to counter the claim of Corinthian women prophets that they experienced the risen Christ and spoke for him, to discourage their speech. Paul wished 'not to provide support for women who prophesy in Corinth from the *news* [emphasis mine] that women's word was the genesis of the resurrection faith'. But perhaps it was not news at all. Paul may have chosen not to mention anything connected to what the four Gospels consider the first resurrection accounts 'because of some meaning of these stories in Corinth'.[27]

26. L.D. Hurst, 'Apollos', *ABD*, I, p. 301. 'Thus the note in Acts 18.25 that Apollos was *zeōn tō pneumati* ('fervent in spirit', RSV) cannot refer to the Holy Spirit, since this would be inconsistent with his subsequent experience with Aquila and Priscilla'. See Wire, '1 Corinthians', pp. 187, 160 (v. 26) and with Paul's subsequent experience preaching in Apollos's wake (Acts 19.1-7) in Ephesus, where Luke says the disciples claim they have not heard there is a Holy Spirit. Contrast Peter Lampe's argument that pre-Lukan tradition knew Apollos as a 'Christian pneumatic' ('Prisca', *ABD*, V, p. 468). See also Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 72-76, 297: she thinks that Acts 19.1-7 may refer to people who were unaware of the notion that the Holy Spirit would be imparted at baptism, and that Apollos was a disciple of Jesus, not of John.

27. Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*, pp. 162-63; Wire, '1 Corinthians', p. 189. She regards Apollos as an ally of the Corinthian women prophets.

Claiming a connection between, on the one hand, the historical role of Mary Magdalene and other women as witness to the death and burial of Jesus and as initiators of faith in the resurrection of Jesus and, on the other hand, the women whose leadership has left traces in the Christian Testament is not claiming that the figure and tradition of Mary Magdalene was the only model, source, and inspiration of this leadership. But if the witness of Mary Magdalene is historically and theologically central to early Christianity,[28] her later influence may bear some important relationship to the strong traces of women's prominence, their claims, and their agency in the first-century communities, especially in their speech.

2. Magdalene Christianity sprang from and developed Jewish apocalyptic and wisdom and prophetic traditions, which are intellectually distinct but were existentially and chronologically intertwined, interrelated. This heritage especially fostered a type of mysticism and insistence on justice before and after death. By this mysticism, I mean a knowledge of God and self from contemplative or ecstatic experience, 'lived out seriously in everyday life' and connected with resistance to injustice.[29] Mysticism was honored, with charisms open to all and nonhierarchical. Enthusiasm existed within a specific kind of order: the just order of Wisdom.[30] Prophecy (associated with Mary Magdalene in Jn 20.18[31]) was accepted as a gift that could be received and exercised by women and men. The belief that Jesus is risen was experienced in visions and free speech, in dress, and in common life. Communities open to hearing from men and women of all classes were democratic

28. I have argued that this reconstruction is plausible (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, Chapters 5, 6, 7).

29. See Dorothee Sölle's contribution to *How I Have Changed* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 22-28 (27). Cf. April D. DeConick (ed.), 'Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions', *SBLSP* (2001), pp. 278-304. Cameron Afzal writes, 'Mysticism is erotic theology' (p. 281). What Phillip Munoa distinguishes as 'vertical apocalypticism' and 'linear apocalypticism' are not separate in the Magdalene Christianity I am reconstructing (pp. 293-94).

30. See Silvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child*, Chapter 5.

31. 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her' (NRSV). Almost formulaic, the passage leaves out her report of Jesus' words.

or democratizing,[32] with power, the 'gifts', and authority (and their economic and educational aspects) decentralized and not in the hands of a few males. A reconstruction of such communities answers the question Jeffrey Kripal asks, '[W]hat would a religious or mystical tradition look like that took democracy seriously, and I mean *really* seriously?'[33] This is the question, What would an ancient mystical tradition of wo/men look like?[34]

With men and women in authority, it was not likely that the priesthood would have been of any literal interest,[35] since the Jerusalem temple priesthood was limited to men and involved animal sacrifice.[36] Only one apocryphal text associated with the name of Mary Magdalene has anything to do with the Eucharist (in the *Apostolic Church Order* Mary's laughing or smiling is given as a reason for banning women from the celebration of the Eucharist).[37] Perhaps in Magdalene Christianity the Eucharist was understood not as a sacrifice

32. See Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon (eds.), *Democratization and Women's Grassroots Movements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), editor's introduction, p. 9: the editors conceive of democracy broadly as both a political system and as a culture that allows for the fullest realization of human creative potential and enhances choices, a process 'by which the voices of ordinary people can find increasing organized expression in the institutions of their societies… In a sense, democracy can never be achieved in any final form—it has to be continually re-created and renegotiated.'

33. Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift* (unpublished manuscript), p. 202.

34. The possibility should be explored that four apocalypses associated with the Virgin Mary (some containing *Merkavah* and *Hekhalot* traditions) might have originally been associated with Mary Magdalene, and thus related in some way to Jn 20 and the *Gospel of Mary*. Richard Bauckham has begun an analysis of these apocalypses (*The Fate of the Dead* [Leiden: Brill, 1998], Chapter 13), but does not entertain this possibility. See Ann Graham Brock, 'Authority, Politics, and Gender in Early Christianity: Mary, Peter, and the Portrayal of Leadership' (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2000) on the substitution of other names, especially those of Mary the Virgin and Peter, for Mary Magdalene. The Marian apocalyptic material also contains references to the Trinity, which I think may be part of baptismal tradition flowing into and from Mt. 28.16-20.

35. See, however, Joan E. Taylor on the use of priesthood concepts and imagery for female Therapeutae ('The Women "Priests" of Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa*: Reconstructing the Therapeutae', in Schaberg, Bach and Fuchs (eds.), *On the Cutting Edge*, pp. 102-22).

36. See Nancy Jay, *Throughout your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), on the gendered aspect of sacrifice.

37. See Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 166.

but as an expression of communality, not as a representation of death but as a celebration of passover freedom. Unmediated access to God and the Spirit given freely were stressed. Succession was prophetic,[38] not linear and/or genealogical, and not as understood in Acts and the Pastorals and later.[39] The Spirit was believed to be given through baptism. In such communities, leadership had a chance of emerging in a spectrum of roles that emphasized non-hierarchical working together and serving together.

Silvia Schroer proposes that sources of the baptismal account in all four canonical Gospels were conceived in terms of Wisdom theology: the dove as symbol of Wisdom rests on Jesus. John the Baptist and Jesus are both Wisdom's children in Lk. 7.31-35 (Q). Wisdom of Solomon's portrayal of the suffering, death, and translation of the just one influenced the Christian Testament crucifixion/resurrection traditions.[40] Wisdom theology, which inclusively identified the risen Jesus with Sophia, informed the understanding of the Corinthian wo/men prophets (cf. 1 Cor. 1.24-30), perhaps as preached by Apollos and drawn from a Palestinian source. Probably connected with baptism, their theology was misconstrued by Paul. Note that Mary

38. As John the Baptist, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and others may have been seen as prophets in the Elijah–Elisha tradition. On Elijah as the Human One in Mk 9.13 (par. Mt. 17.9-13), see Taylor, *The Immerser*, pp. 281-87.

39. In a review of *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, Pius C. Murray, CSS, says 'Pope Mary Magdalene I. That in a nutshell is the conclusion of the interesting, thought provoking, new book by Jane Schaberg' (*Catholic Library World* [December 2002]). That in a nutshell was precisely *not* my conclusion: calling Mary Magdalene *a* (not *the*) successor of Jesus, I was not presenting a reading of Jn 20 that fosters structures of domination. Denise Kimber Buell discusses procreative and kinship (father to son) language used to depict the transmission of knowledge and authority (*Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999]). Like the language of imitation, it 'privileges sameness over difference and naturalizes a hierarchy of power relations among Christians' (p. 14). For Clement it provided a framework for presenting Christianity as an essential unity (sameness, conformity), originating in one source, and for excluding the 'illegitimate' others (p. 18), silencing rival voices (pp. 180-81).

40. For example, Lk. 11.49; Mt. 27.43 with Wis. 2.18, 20; Mk 14.62 with Wis. 5.1-2, 5; Lk. 23.47 with Wis. 3.1; Mk 16.19 with Wis. 4.10, 14. See Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985), pp. 134-35; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, II (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 995, 1451-52.

Magdalene is called 'the spirit of wisdom' in the Manichaean Psalm Book 2.194.19.[41] These separate but connected loci of Wisdom imagery and thought[42] are instances of Sophia theology, which has been regarded by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as 'the decisive factor' that made a community of equals, a liberating praxis, possible.[43]

3. Images of the Human One or Son of Man, derived from Jewish apocalyptic literature and developed in mystical traditions, were central to the *basileia* movement of Jesus and his companions, and to Magdalene Christianity. The figure of the Human One (later narrowed to refer to the individual Jesus alone) was understood as corporate, and incorporating. Phillip B. Munoa III argues that the vision of Stephen in Acts 7, the throne scene in Revelation 4–5, and the series of visions in the early third-century work *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* demonstrate how a *merkavah* vision became associated with martyrdom.[44] In my opinion, this association was already in the spirituality and thinking of this *basileia* movement as an expectation of the suffering and resurrection of the Human One. A corporate, not individualistic, understanding of the Human One underlay and survived within certain interpretation(s) of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It grounded the belief seen in Corinth and elsewhere that the resurrection of the dead is in some way the resurrection of the living.

While the phrase *ho huios tou anthrōpou* does not appear in the Pauline writings (or anywhere outside the Gospels in the Christian Testament except Acts 7.56 [Stephen's vision] and Rev. 1.13; 14.14 [John's visions][45]), for the prophets of Corinth, the metaphor of the body continued the function of the Human One: creating unity, shared authority, and joyful courage. But Paul used the body metaphor in a different way, stressing that the body has different parts related to

41. For different understandings of this phrase, see Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 136.

42. Schüssler Fiorenza traces the submerged theology of Wisdom in the Christian Scriptures (*Jesus: Miriam's Child*, pp. 139-55).

43. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 130-40; Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built*, p. 153.

44. Phillip B. Munoa III, 'Jesus, the *Merkavah*, and Martyrdom in Early Christian Tradition', *JBL* 121 (2002), pp. 303-25.

45. Heb. 2.6-8 quotes Ps. 8.4-6.

different charisms (stratified, individual), and warning of the possibility of amputation. Egalitarian diversity was suppressed in favor of what Paul saw as the common good, in a kind of leveling that paradoxically reinstated ranking and hierarchy. The Corinthian prophets thought that they already bore the image of the one of heaven (the Human One); Paul thought that this lay in the future (1 Cor. 15.49).[46]

The masculine language ('Son of Man'), of course, must have alienated women, forced them to double-think in order not to regard themselves as excluded. But many women were and are good at that resistance, at paying that price. Androcentrism is an aspect of the imagination and utopian vision that is deformed by sexism and kyriarchy; but the deformation is not total, not fatal. That a woman could imagine herself or be imagined as included in this corporate figure leaves traces in Perpetua's metamorphosis into a 'man' (*Passion* 10.7)[47] and even in sayings such as *Gospel of Thomas* 114, in which Jesus makes Mary Magdalene 'male'. Within the streams of tradition flowing from Daniel 7, this was not simply optimistic belief in the human species, the solidarity of the human race; it was rather an apocalyptic expectation and experience that conquered the sense of aloneness and the fear of death and empowered action.

Esther A. de Boer holds that the *Gospel of Mary* 'advocates egalitarian discipleship in the sense that all disciples have been made *true Human Being* and all received the instruction to preach the gospel… and…all are prepared to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of *the Son of Man*'.[48] Karen King translates such phrases inclusively because the

46. See Wire, '1 Corinthians', pp. 190-92.

47. Munoa ('Jesus, the *Merkavah*, and Martyrdom', p. 321 n. 61) says that her metamorphosis 'may be understandable in terms of Dan 7' and in terms of the suffering Christians modeling themselves after and thinking of themselves as becoming like Jesus, a 'man'. In her ascent to heaven, overcoming of the dragon, and being welcomed and gifted by the seated gray-haired man, Perpetua is 'patterned after' Daniel's 'one like a son of man'. 'For most Christian readers the "one like a son of man" is Jesus, the one who after his victory, achieved through suffering and death, went on to empowerment' (p. 319). Munoa reviews other explanations of her gender transformation, which I think may also be factors in the appropriation of this imagery: S. Maitland: Perpetua's manhood represents a suppression of feminine characteristics; D. Schafer: her transformation is an example of a woman's empowerment in the church; L. Sullivan: Perpetua appropriates imagery of the dominant in order to converse on the dominant's terms.

48. De Boer, *Gospel of Mary*, pp. 192, 194 (emphases mine).

language has that connotation in the context of this work.[49] It has that connotation, I think, wherever else 'Son of Man' traditions strain to become expressions of full humanity.

4. Magdalene Christianity was focused on an understanding of baptism related to this corporate figure. John's coming one (*ho erchomenos*) would baptize with fire, in which Lars Hartman sees the fire streaming from the throne in Dan. 7.10.[50] John's own apocalyptic-prophetic baptism was linked with a program of social justice that 'challenged the very foundations of the social order' (Lk. 3.10-14, 16-17). 'He asked the baptized to forsake the normal socially accepted ways of acting and living and to take up new ways'.[51] These new ways were a renewal and rethinking of Israelite ideals of justice. Such a program was expressed and developed in the pre-Pauline baptismal formula of Gal. 3.27-28: 'As many of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and (*kai*) female; for all of you are one (*heis*) in Christ Jesus.'[52] The last phrase, using *heis* (masculine) instead of *hen* (neuter), and referring to Christ Jesus, makes the formula androcentric, and Paul further integrates it into a patriarchal framework.[53] But I think *heis* was used originally in reference to the Human One, *ho erchōmenos* having come, that is, with language that is still androcentric but inclusive. You are all one in the Human One, one in a 'person' (the concept and word 'person' not yet available), not one in a 'thing'. Compare the reference to clothing oneself 'with perfect humanity' (King translation) in *Gos. Mary* 10.1.1, and putting on 'the living human being' in *Gos. Phil.* 75.21-24. Because the formula in Galatians mentions Jew/Greek (and not

49. See Karen King, 'The Gospel of Mary', in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures*, II, pp. 606-607; King, 'The Gospel of Mary', p. 362.

50. Lars Hartman, 'Baptism', *ABD*, I, p. 584.

51. Paul W. Hollenbach, 'John the Baptist', *ABD*, III, pp. 893-97. 1 have suggested elsewhere that Mary Magdalene may have been associated with John the Baptist (*The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 341-42).

52. For a summary of the variety of interpretations of Gal. 3.26-28, see Carolyn Osiek, 'Galatians', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Sharon Ringe and Carol Newsom; Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 335; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 149-73.

53. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, p. 163.

Jew/Gentile), it is believed to have been formed in a Jewish-Hellenistic community, perhaps coming from the pre-Pauline missionary movement centered around Antioch. But it is possible that the formula has a Palestinian, provenance. Josephus (*Life* 66–67) refers to the 'Greek' citizens of Tiberias who were massacred during the war of 66–70.[54]

The phrase 'neither male and female' (missing from 1 Cor. 12.13 and Col. 3.11, where patriarchal marriage is affirmed) need not be understood as extinguishing the spark of sexuality, sublimated or not. That is, although it is open to an ascetic interpretation and implementation, the phrase need not be read as insisting that human beings must relate in asexual, nonsexual ways, with gender differences abolished. Schüssler Fiorenza reads 'neither male *and* female' as meaning 'neither husband and wife': that is, as abolishing patriarchal marriage, which she sees as at the root of the sociopolitical system of status that reproduces kyriarchy and is produced by it. The *ekklesia* envisioned and attempted to practice a marriage-free ethos. Galatians 3.27-28 was a 'radical theological claim to equality' announcing the invalidity of kyriarchal gender ideology and of ethnic, religious, and status differences.

The 'oneness' in Christ, in this reading, was not otherworldly, spiritual, and non-political; rather, it was a stand against disparities, barriers, cleavages, false distinctions, hierarchies, and differences that divided slave from free, Jew from Greek, men from women. It stood against notions of the mental, social, and racial biological inferiority and weakness of subalterns; it defied the political powerlessness of slaves, Jews, wo/men. Extolling 'the social oneness of the messianic community', it rejected all structures of domination, all social, cultural, religious, national, and biological gender divisions and status differences. Galatians 3.27-28, Schüssler Fiorenza claims, was 'a realistic program of action and unconventional living', with political, economic, gender, sexual, sociocultural, philosophical, and theological dimensions.[55]

The mention of many women in the Gospels without reference to males, husbands, or sons (as in Lk. 8.1-3 and the crucifixion/tomb narratives) does not necessarily indicate that few of Jesus' companions

54. See Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), pp. 271-75, 78-79.

55. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, pp. 149, 153, 155.

were or had been married[56] or that they were celibate, though it may signal aspects of autonomy and independence that were part of the pre-Pauline tradition. Questions abound. To focus here on gender relations:

If the notion 'neither male *and* female' meant that patriarchal marriage was no longer constitutive for the new creation in the Spirit, this was bound to create difficult practical problems in everyday life. In light of it people might have raised questions such as: Did baptism abolish all previous marriage relationships? Could one, especially a wo/man, remain marriage-free even though this was against the law?[57] If one remained married to a pagan, what about the children? Did it mean that one could live together without being married? Did it imply that one should live as a celibate and abstain from all sexual intercourse? Was marriage only legal, and not also a religious affair? Did wo/men just like men have control over their own body and life?[58]

Further, how could a couple work to abolish structures of domination in their relationship and interactions? Could some sexual partnerships be egalitarian? If so, how? How could a single woman (unmarried, divorced, or widowed) survive in society? How did men and women experience differently these possibilities, requirements, and choices? The choice, for example, of celibacy or virginity was quite different for a woman than for a man, as was childlessness. Marriage and non-marriage had to do not just with sex but with inheritance, education, safety, and travel. How could God be imagined and conceptualized without acceptance of structures of domination and subordination? How could unity-in-diversity be symbolized? How could a community be ordered without the structures of domination? How could power be contained? What reparations, reeducations would be necessary? What speaking, what listening? And again: What about children?

A community baptized into freedom from social expectations of all dominance and subordination would have to wrestle with these questions and many more. The fact that we can see them being wrestled with in many Christian Testament and apocryphal[59] texts, and see

56. See Bauckham's discussion, *Gospel Women*, pp. 116-21.

57. I do not know what law is meant here—Gen. 2.24?

58. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, p. 120. See n. 21 above, Castelli's questions about women's leadership.

59. Exploration of how baptism was understood and practiced in 'heretical' groups, and how this related to Gal. 3.27-28, to visionary/prophetic experience, and to Human One imagery and language is obviously beyond the scope of this article,

them lying just below the surface of texts,[60] convinces me that such a reading of Gal. 3.27-28 is one that 'can do justice to the text in its historical context'.[61] Moreover, the reading does not 'fix the meaning' because undoing the structures of domination had and has multiple meanings, multiple interpretations, multiple consequences, multiple applications, multiple problems. It *cannot* be dogmatically usurped, *cannot* be reduced to, the experience, interests, assumptions, world-view, or practices of any individual or group.

5. A low christology (a Jesusology?) may have been characteristic of Magdalene Christianity and may have been linked to the centrality of belief in the Human One—linked, that is, to a corporate christology. Understanding Jesus as member of, an instance of, the Human One precluded focus on him as an individual who was above all other human beings and separate from them. Historical reconstruction that has wo/men at its center yields a christology quite different not only from Paul's christology but also from overriding general impressions of the canonical Gospels and the christology of each of them. The Gospels present Jesus in a unique Father–Son relationship with God. No human character is represented as equal to Jesus. Like a cowboy, he has no wife, no lover, no partner, no intimate companion, no colleague, no fully mutual human relationship. He is unique in terms of exclusivity, privilege, and superiority.[62] Contemporary feminist

and complicated by the fact that we have little information about their social organization and religious praxis. See Karen L. King, 'Sophia and Christ in the *Apocryphon of John*', and response by John D. Turner, in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism* (ed. Karen L. King; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 158-86, and other chapters in this volume; Anne McGuire, 'Women, Gender and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions', in Kraemer and D'Angelo (eds.), pp. 266-67; de Boer, *Gospel of Mary*, pp. 28, 68, 81-82.

60. And being wrestled with by interpreters. J. Louis Martyn's reading enshrines an ancient resistance to the interpretation offered here: 'Religious, social and sexual pairs of opposites are not replaced by equality, but rather by a newly created unity' (*Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB, 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997], p. 377).

61. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, p. 27: 'An ethics of critical reading changes the task of interpretation from finding out "what the text meant" to the question of what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical context'.

62. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child*, p. 131, for the distinction between seeing Jesus' uniqueness in terms of particularity and distinctness and in terms of exclusivity, privilege, and superiority.

criticism insists that the understanding of Jesus as feminist come to liberate women from Judaism is both a misrepresentation of the evangelists' interpretation of him, and a historically flawed reconstruction. In my opinion, also flawed in this respect are aspects of the 'hero' or divine ideal. Low christology can be assessed by feminist scholarship not as something to be superseded but as something valuable that was lost.[63]

The pervasive but submerged Wisdom theology in the Christian Testament may articulate early understandings of Jesus, perhaps even something of his own prophetic understanding of himself. Jesus and John the Baptist are understood as among the 'children' of Wisdom (Lk. 7.35 [Q]), and it is implied that Jesus is a prophet and an apostle of Wisdom (Lk. 11.49; cf. 13.34) who speaks as or for Wisdom (Mt. 11.19, 28-30; 23.34, 37-39; parallel Lk. 13.34-35) as do others (see Prov. 9.1-6). There is little christological development and a low sophiology in the Q material, with 'relative lack of emphasis on Jesus himself'.[64] Traces of his 'ordinary' connections with others appear in the Gospels. Two women are depicted as standing up to him in conversation (the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mk 7.24-30; the Samaritan woman in Jn 4.1-42). He is said to have 'loved' some (Jn 11.5), called some 'friends' (15.14-15), and promised them empowerment equal to and even superior to his own (14.12). The fact that women are not called 'disciples' in the Gospels (although the title may be given them by readers) opens up, as we have seen, the possibility that they are colleagues, which means that Jesus can be thought of as something other than dominating Master who is superior and privileged.

Jesus the Human One 'came not to be served but to serve' (Mk 10.45; parallel Mt. 20.28; cf. Lk. 22.24-27: 'I am among you as one who serves'). 'Serving' is work that male disciples are never said to do in the Gospels,[65] though they are called to do it. Women and angels

63. C.F.D. Moule points to 'three paradoxes in the New Testament convictions about Jesus—his humiliation and exaltation, his continuity with and discontinuity from the rest of humanity, and the individuality and yet inclusiveness of his person' ('The Manhood of Jesus in the New Testament', in *Crisis in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution* [ed. W.R. Farmer; Livonia, MI: Dove Booksellers, 1995], pp. 95-110 [48]).

64. Levine, 'Women in the Q Communities', p. 153.

65. In contrast, women are not said to serve in Acts, but only men (Acts 6.3; 19.22; cf. also the noun *diakonia* in 1.17; 6.1, 4; 11.29; 12.25; 20.24; 21.19). This is an indication that 'official' ministry is in the process of being reserved to males.

(Mk 1.13; parallel Mt. 4.11) do it,[66] and of course so do servants/slaves.[67] *Diakonoun* connotes social subordination; it 'refers almost exclusively to the menial labor of women and slaves, performed for the people of higher rank on whom they are economically dependent'.[68] This layer of meaning persists when the verb acquires the technical meaning of 'ministering' in the *ekklesia*. While Jesus is depicted only as 'serving' in grand and symbolic fashion (the feeding of multitudes, the washing of disciples' feet) or miraculously (curing, not caring for the sick), and as not preventing women from serving him or the disciples (Lk. 8.1-3), he can still be reconstructed as representing Wisdom as a wo/man. Not a 'real man', but rather a marginalized man, struggling against oppression 'at the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid'[69] with his co-servers.

Sayings such as 'Who made me judge?' (Lk. 12.14) and 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone' (Mk 10.18)[70] are not just examples of a low christology that later reflection and insight outgrew. As Martin Buber remarked, '[A]nyone who thinks of Jesus neither as a god only apparently clothed in human form, nor as a paranoiac…will not regard his human certainty about himself as an unbroken continuity'. He was subject to 'attacks of uncertainty', 'attacks of self-questioning' (Mk 8.27ff.), and real despair (Mk 15.34; parallel Mt. 27.46).[71]

The Gospel of John presents the highest christology (Jn 20.28), but also contains a low-key, flexible christology articulated by women. His mother makes no faith statement, but implies that she believes in his powers when she informs him of a need for wine at the wedding at

66. Simon's mother-in-law (Mk 1.13; parallel Mt. 8.14-15; Lk. 4.38-39); women traveling with Jesus (Lk. 8.1-3); Martha (Lk. 10.40; cf. Jn 12.2); women at the cross (Mk 15.41; parallel Mt. 27.55).

67. Lk. 17.18; cf. the noun *diakonos* in Mt. 22.13; Jn 2.5.

68. Louise Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), p. 205.

69. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child*, p. 14. See Susannah Heschel, 'Jesus as Theological Transvestite', in *Judaism since Gender* (ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt; London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 188-99 (192). Her primary interest in this article is in how the transvestism of Jesus questions the constructs and destabilizes the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity.

70. Martin Buber comments on this saying: it is as if Jesus warded off divinization (*Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity* [New York: Harper & Row, 1961], p. 116).

71. Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, p. 31.

Cana (2.3, 5). The Samaritan woman remarks tentatively, 'I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things… Can this be the Christ?' (4.25, 29). In response to Jesus' statement that he is the resurrection and the life, Martha says, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world (*ho eis ton kosmon erchomenos*)'; but then she hesitates to have Lazarus's tomb opened, expecting a stench (11.27, 30). There is a contrast here in the Martha and Mary traditions to the christology associated with Peter in Mk 8.27-33 and parallels, in which messiahship is separated from the suffering Human One. Martha's sister Mary says merely what Martha says before her, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died' (11.22, 33). Later she silently anoints his feet, anticipating the foot washing at the Last Supper, and the action is said to prophesy his burial (12.3-8). Recognizing the risen Jesus when he speaks her name, Mary Magdalene calls him (only) *Rabbouni* ('little rabbi', 20.16). She is given the leveling message to deliver to his 'brothers': 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (20.17). Her claim in v. 18 is simply 'I have seen the Lord'. None of the women characters in the Gospel of John are singled out for condemnation as 'Jews', nor are their christological statements condemned by 'Jews'.

We can speculate that the Jesus of Magdalene Christianity was not remembered as domineering, dominating; that is, not primarily as 'Lord' in this sense. Jesus was not the only one who talked, decided, judged, and healed; and as an aspect of the Human One, he was not the only one who suffered and rose from the dead. Like the corporate concept of the Human One, the egalitarian understanding of baptism seen in the pre-Pauline formula of Gal. 3.27-28, and the inclusive sophiology of the Corinthian prophets, this low christology all but faded away. How it may or may not relate to apocryphal christologies, such as that of the *Gospel of Mary*, needs careful analysis.

6. Resurrection was at the spiritual core of Magdalene Christianity. Suffering was not central, nor were repentance, guilt, or individualistic 'born-again-ness'. The Gospel format of Peter's story (denial, rehabilitation, authorization) and Paul's (persecution, revelation, transformation) is quite different from the format of the story of Mary Magdalene and the other women (steadfastness, fear and courage, revelation, authorization). The latter stresses connection, interconnectedness, lives challenging boundaries and barriers. Resurrection was understood

to be about striving to live lives that move beyond the deaths of division, and beyond the fear of death. The moving, of course, involved suffering, but suffering was not the focus of attention. Eyes were on the prize. Even maybe, at times, hands were on the prize.

To the claim that resurrection can be experienced in the present, and to the lifestyle built on that claim, Paul responded by locating resurrection in the future and by calling believers to face suffering now, a call unnecessary and stifling for the powerless. It is striking that in the Gospels the resurrection faith was articulated at the empty tomb by those who had experienced up-close a gruesome execution. If we have a desire 'to witness the witnessing of revelation—to try to see how such a totality was experienced',[72] we are directed by Magdalene Christianity to the extremes of poverty and death as the place of resurrection insight.

7. Magdalene Christianity was opposed at every stage that we can reconstruct historically, and was ultimately all but defeated. Almost completely erased from memory and use were the components we have analyzed: the prophecy and leadership of women, the corporate concept of the Human One and even this title, the importance of the Wisdom and mystical traditions, the understanding of baptism as challenging social barriers and inequities, the low christology(ies), the Corinthian prophets' experience of resurrection, and the heritage of Mary Magdalene. I see these as submerged traditions[73] of an Atlantis, coherent. They surface from time to time.

Why Magdalene Christianity was opposed is far more mysterious to me than the resurrection faith itself. The search for reasons for the opposition is interesting, but yields no final answers; however logical, the opposition is basically irrational. The desire of the privileged to protect their status, perks, and distinctiveness; the desire to conform congregations to (non-egalitarian, unjust) social norms; the desire to protect Christianity from association with what were seen as 'orgiastic, secret, oriental cults that undermined public order and decency'[74]—all

72. See François Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 33, on secular postmodernism's nostalgia for religious texts of the Middle Ages and before.

73. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child*, p. 132 on laboring 'beneath the headlamp' to mine submerged traditions.

74. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 232.

these were certainly aspects of opposition. Add also misunderstanding and ignorance (willed and unwilled); fears of many kinds; inconsistencies, jealousy, lack of courage, and brutality; superficial religious sensibilities; and the real, continued weakness and powerlessness of wo/men—economic, social, political—whose task was to transform these structures, to transfigure 'the given world', not to escape from or deny it.[75] Energy and confidence must have ebbed and flowed in the protracted struggle for freedom,[76] the struggle, that is, to live in the freedom believed to be already won.[77]

But Magdalene Christianity was never quite defeated, at least on the fringes. Reconstruction of the lost options forces a radical rereading and reassessment of the history of Christianity, in which some margins may appear over centuries as the (true or truer) center. Feminist scholarship provides clues and directions in the past about roads not taken, roads abandoned. These are, interestingly, roads rediscovered or retraveled by some smaller Christian groups in history and in modern times. Such reconstructions may be today 'history capable of teaching us how to avoid past mistakes'.[78]

8. Magdalene Christianity was not Christianity but a developing form (one of many) of first-century CE Judaism. It may be true, of course, that none of two types of what became Christianity had broken from Judaism and formed a radically separate religion by the end of the first century CE, and true that different responses to the power of the

75. Amos Wilder, 'Eschatological Imagery and Early Circumstances', *NTS* 5 (1958–59), pp. 220-45 (234).

76. Orlando Patterson remarks on the decisive role women played 'in the Western social invention of *personal* freedom and in its history' (*Freedom*. I. *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* [New York: Basic Books, 1991], p. xv).

77. John J. Collins comments: 'It is in the nature of apocalyptic eschatology that it can never be fully realized in this life. Even when the hopes could be realized in principle, they most often failed to materialize… Apocalyptic hope is invariably hope deferred. Nonetheless, it has persisted as a recurring feature of Western religion for over two thousand years. While it can never deliver on its promises, it continues to speak eloquently to the hearts of those who would otherwise have no hope at all' ('From Prophecy to Apocalypticism', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. I. *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* [ed. Bernard McGinn, John Joseph Collins, and Stephen J. Stein; New York: Continuum, 1998], pp. 129-61 [159]).

78. Eller, *Myth*, p. 185.

Roman Empire fostered the split from 70 CE Judaism.[79] But Magdalene Christianity seems to me to have certain features that, so to speak, resist the split; it looks less on its way to becoming Christianity than some other early types. To oversimplify, Magdalene Christianity is in many ways closer to the Enumah type of faith (trusting someone) than to the Pistis faith (acknowledging something as true) as described by Buber in *Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity*. The former depends primarily on a 'state of contact with the one in whom I trust'; the latter can lead to such contact. The former is communal, the latter individual; the former is a 'persisting-in', the latter a 'facing about', a conversion, a leap from the absurd. Buber understood the former to involve 'an actual relationship which essentially transcends the world of the person' and a finding of eternity 'in the depth of the actual moment',[80] but he did not associate this with the 'mystical', which he judged (I think wrongly) to be about union which destroys dialogue, about a swallowing up of the I by the You, an alienation from the world.[81] The intimate connection between mysticism and apocalyptic expectation of the overcoming of death, I have argued, is context for the resurrection faith of the women at the empty tomb.[82] It can be seen also as context for the experience of the Corinthian prophets, the theologian(s) of the *Gospel of Mary*, and the long line of their spiritual descendants.

The post-Holocaust perspective of Margie Tolstoy produces the two-pronged insight that 'Christianity is an orphaned religion unless it returns to the Judaism of Jesus and reconnects with contemporary Judaism and Jewish scholarship'.[83] Tolstoy links her insight with the witness of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb of Jesus, which she reads as stressing the unfinished character of salvation, placing Jesus alongside rather than above people, providing an 'alternative reality' to the one that stresses obedience to an all-powerful Being who

79. See Dieter Georgi, 'Was the Early Church Jewish?', *BR* (2001), pp. 33-37, 51-52; Georgi, 'The Early Church: Internal Jewish Migration or New Religion?', *HTR* 81 (1995), pp. 35-68.

80. Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, pp. 8, 10, 21, 34.

81. See Pamela Vermes, *Buber* (New York: Grove, 1988), p. 11: 'He nevertheless belongs to Jewish mystical tradition'.

82. See Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*.

83. Margie Tolstoy, 'Woman as Witness in a Post-Holocaust Perspective', in *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 117-27 (125).

rescues.[84] What might be the ways of such a return and a reconnection? Krister Stendahl once advised Christians to ask Jews, in spite of all the anti-Judaism of Christian history, 'whether they are willing to let us become again part of their family, a peculiar part to be true, but, even so, relatives who believe themselves to be a peculiar kind of Jews'.[85] An unfolding of Magdalene Christianity, in its history and its present possibilities, might be a road of return for Christians and Christian theology to the new departure Stendahl thought necessary.

Let me go back briefly to my earlier remark that this essay names something that was unnamed. The absence of the name of Mary Magdalene in places where one might expect it (1 Cor. 15; Acts 1) is not only evidence of erasure, negative evidence that the name was important, controversial. It can also be seen as aspect of the resurrection faith:

> Belief in the Resurrection has never been merely about what may have happened *then*, for it is more about what those who listen to and interpret the story of the Resurrection of Jesus *do* about it for themselves… *There is no privileged moment when a favoured few saw face to face while the rest of us have to make do with seeing in a glass darkly… Resurrection faith will not permit the abandonment of the hope of the transforming power of God's justice in history*.[86]

The absence of the name may indicate that Mary Magdalene was not seen as a model to be imitated,[87] or someone in whose name prophecy and creativity were justified and authorized. The absence can also serve as a reminder that so much is lost.

What happens to the Christian Testament and our readings of it when we take this reconstruction of Magdalene Christianity into account? It looks and reads to me something like a draft, as Rachel

84. Tolstoy refers to the article of Melissa Raphael ('When God Beheld God: Note toward a Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust', *FemTh* 21 [1999], pp. 53-78 [59]).

85. Krister Stendahl, 'Judaism and Christianity: A Plea for a New Relationship', in *Disputation and Dialogue* (ed. Frank E. Talmage; New York: Ktav, 1975), pp. 330-42 (337). Contrast Jacob Neusner, 'How Judaism and Christianity Can Talk to Each Other', *BR* (1990), pp. 32-41, 45.

86. Christopher Rowland, 'Interpreting the Resurrection', in *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (ed. Paul Avis; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), pp. 68-84 (69, 79, emphasis in original).

87. See Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 16.

Blau DuPlessis writes a draft. It becomes a collage of fragments, aborted ideas, blackouts, white spaces, instructions, verbal experimentations, doodles, dots. Some words and phrases are in bold type, some tiny, some in caps, and there may be two or three columns interacting or not. It is 'mudrush' (draft 6): 'It is they that speak / silt / we weep / silt / the flood-bound / written over and under with their / muddy marks // of writing under the writing'.[88]

> The 'primary' text shows its fragments, repetitions, gaps and in textual snippets and multiple voices that unsettle the notion of a 'true version of events'… [This pushes readers] beyond orderly reading practices, our expectation of easy connections and transparent access to information [to what DuPlessis calls the] random recovery / of unresolved tidbits… [that] can never be assimilated within social norms and institutions.[89]

DuPlessis is interested in what is and will always be unfinished, 'the possible slippage between something that takes place and / something that is spoken of… The "unsaid" is a shifting boundary / resisting even itself.'[90] When as wo/men we read defensively, so as not to be harmed; when we read creatively, so as to speak, we read 'mudrashically'. We learn to read and value fragments.[91] This is one of the many things Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza shows is possible, exciting, and politically worthwhile.

88. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Drafts 1–38, Toll* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 36.

89. Linda A. Kinnaban, 'Experiments in Feminism', *Women's Review of Books* 19 (2002), p. 14.

90. Du Plessis, *Drafts 1–38*, p. 75.

91. See Walter Brueggemann, 'A Fissure Always Uncontained', in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (ed. Tod Linafelt; New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 62-75 (71-73); Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

12

Further Reflections on Magdalene Christianity*

The study of the figure of Mary Magdalene is leading to new and more complex understandings of Christian origins, which means new and more complex understandings of Christianity's present and possible future. This study is taking place in many locations and in different ways:[1] scholars poring over ancient manuscripts from the Christian Testament to the apocryphal *Gospel of Mary*,[2] and other non-canonical works; art historians examining paintings and sculptures; medievalists and church historians looking at sermons and patristic literature; producers, writers, and actors making Jesus films and film critics dissecting them; TV producers generating 'biographies'; activists working for women's ordination and religious reforms; novelists, poets, and songwriters creating. So many people living in the twentieth–twenty-first centuries focused on this woman of the first century CE. Even *Time* and *Newsweek* are paying attention.

Among the factors contributing to this contemporary interest in Mary Magdalene is the discovery in 1947 and earlier of apocryphal materials, the so-called gnostic Gospels,[3] which have brought to light

* This essay is based on two presentations: one to the Women and the Historical Jesus section of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2003 and the second in Heidelberg in 2009. Of the second, Jane writes: 'I am attempting to clarify and go beyond what I have written in *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha and Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002) and 'Magdalene Christianity', in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds, Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs; New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 193-220.

1. For a recent bibliography of Magdalene studies, see Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

2. For a translation and commentary, see Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003).

3. See Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), regarding problems with the term 'gnostic'. She argues that the *Gospel of Mary* is not gnostic (*The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*).

texts in which the character of Mary Magdalene is unexpectedly prominent as a leader, prophet, mystic, and who is praised and loved by Jesus, but in conflict with other disciples. These discoveries have led to Mary Magdalene becoming a sort of action figure, not just for women's ordination, but for women's awareness of the ways in which women's history has been distorted, ignored, appropriated and women themselves denied leadership or their sexuality and intelligence stigmatized; an action figure also for awareness of women's agency and spirituality. The larger context of this interest in Mary Magdalene is the women's movement, characterized at present by the development of women's studies and gender studies in the academy, and by women's increased activism in socio-political arenas. To this context, publications like *Time* and *Newsweek* pay little or no attention, or express hostility.[4] Like Mary the mother of Jesus, Joan of Arc, and others, Mary Magdalene is of great interest to feminist scholars because her representation is so varied and changes so over time: it expresses sexism and resistance to sexism, submission and erotic freedom, the crushing of women's leadership and its survival. In the ambivalence of her image is its iconic power.

As a biblical scholar, my primary interest is in the ancient texts, but in this case I cannot approach them responsibly without also engaging the movies, the art, the novels, as well as the contemporary turmoil regarding women and institutional religions, and the political uses and manipulation of that turmoil. Reconstruction involves deconstruction of ideologies of romance, of women's evil and repentance, beauty, religious-political power, and lack of power. Novels by men and women, from Kazantzakis to Margaret George, give us multiple versions of a love story that semi-humanizes Jesus and generally highlights the Magdalene's repentance and ongoing or burnt-out seductiveness, her dangerousness, her demon-possession. These novels follow a common schema: early wealth, lust, whoring, meeting Jesus, love and repentance, mourning his death, claiming he is resurrected. Under the influence of recent biblical criticism, a few omit the wealth and the whoring.[5] The theatre and movies have so far also given us only the repentant whore: conventionally beautiful, conventionally

4. See Kenneth Woodward's editorial 'God's Woman Trouble' (*Newsweek* [8 Dec. 2003], p. 60): 'Scholars who explore the role of women in the bible with a political agenda in mind only hurt their cause'.

5. See Margaret George, *Mary, Called Magdalene* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

sexual, an airhead.[6] When Mel Gibson was asked on a talk show why he cast Monica Bellucci as Mary Magdalene in *The Passion of Christ*, Gibson replied simply, 'Because she's beautiful'. Why not cast Helen Mirren, Kathy Bates, Vanessa Redgrave, Tracy Chapman, Sigourney Weaver, Tovah Feldshuh? We know why not. With a different Magdalene, the whole story is different.

Much of this is profoundly boring to me, aside from its potential as a focus for the study of an aspect of popular religion and culture. It frustrates me how little acquaintance the general public has with the fascinating complexity of contemporary biblical studies, and with the texts themselves: *de*harmonized, each Gospel and each apocryphal work carefully compared and contrasted. The temptation to conflate stories and to fill in blanks with acts of imagination is understandable. We know very little about the historical Mary Magdalene: her age, class, economic status, education, looks, sex life, occupation, family, youth, death. Aside from being mentioned in Luke 8, Mary Magdalene appears in the Gospels only at the cross and empty tomb. She and the other women seem to come out of nowhere in the crucifixion scenes of Mark, Matthew, and John, but in the first two they are said to have been there all along, having followed Jesus from Galilee (Mk 15.40-41; Mt. 27.55-56; cf. Lk. 23.49). I have not been able to think of any other story in which a major character appears at a crucial point near the end and is revealed to have been present all along, an invisible presence. But this is what the androcentric view does to women characters in the Gospel. Nonetheless, we *can* reconstruct something in the way of historical possibilities and probabilities, and what we can reconstruct is significant. These acts of reconstruction, historians are increasingly aware, also reveal much about those doing the reconstruction: for example, what the investigator assumes or takes for granted, is willing to entertain as possible or likely or suspicious of; how savvy the investigator is in terms of identifying gender schemas and how they operate; how conscious the investigator is of the political dimensions of his or her work; for whom and what purpose the work is done—all these elements are factors that will influence outcome.

Scholars all agree that the creation of the legends of Mary Magdalene as repentant whore had its origin in the conflation of texts that had nothing to do with her. Most important are John 12 (the story of

6. See in this volume 'Mary Magdalene in the Movies'. In contrast to this stereotype, the Magdalene-type woman in Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* is a figure of quiet resistance to the commercialization of Christianity.

Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus before his death), Luke 7 (the story of an unnamed 'woman of the city, a sinner'), and John 8 (the story of an unnamed woman caught in the act of adultery, who was protected by Jesus). Painters and moviemakers love these scenes. Mary Magdalene appears in none of them in the Christian Testament.

The distortion is complex: part conflation, part power plays. Sexual politics is certainly a part of it, as are the imposition of cultural/political norms and ideas about gender identities and relationships. Both men and women have participated in the creation and promulgation of these distortions. Both men and women are fond of, sometimes passionate about, the image of the repentant prostitute, whose life shows that no one is beyond redemption. The tenacity of this image has many aspects, one of which is awe of and respect for the prostitute: the idea that prostitutes are truth tellers, have hearts of gold, are women in charge of their own sexuality. I recognize the power of that image, as well as the danger of being drawn into a divide-and-conquer strategy, pitting 'good' women against 'bad' women. Some novels now, including *The Da Vinci Code*, replace the prostitute Magdalene with a Mary Magdalene married to Jesus, as if this somehow redeems her. There is simply no evidence, however, to persuade the historian that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married or unmarried sexual lovers.

I prefer to let the question of the genital sexuality of Mary Magdalene (with Jesus or anyone else) remain ambiguous, an open question. While I do not want to get drawn into the trap of creating the image of an *asexual* or *non-sexual* Mary Magdalene, I recognize that this is something inquiring minds cannot know. Sexual relations are neither described nor ruled out. Here is a gap that one can fill or not. My preference is for not filling it: not closing it by conventional sexual stereotypes and expectations; leave it open, a question that is more important than its answer.[7]

7. Revisionist imagination has a hard time depicting love between a Mary Magdalene who is not a whore and Jesus. Margaret George, for example (*Mary, Called Magdalene*), still tries to write a love scene between them, with now good-girl Mary Magdalene throwing herself at Jesus, urging him to take a different path and attend to her needs, seeing him as marriage material. But he chooses a path that does not have her beside him. Maureen Dowd, in a review, writes, 'the new Mary's arc from pious good girl to Mrs Sardine Salesman to Pillar of the Church may leave you a little nostalgic for the transgressive Mary's more gripping drama of sin and redemption, of flirting with the Messiah and finding faith with him' ('Seeing Mary Magdalene as One of the Apostles', *New York Times* [9 July 2002], p. B8). It is clear that if Mary Magdalene is revised, much else, including Jesus and including gender expectations, also has to be revised.

Mary Magdalene as whore or Jesus' wife, both historically untenable, are both also alternatives that draw us away from the texts themselves and from history. They function to block an understanding of Mary Magdalene's role in the creation of resurrection faith, her membership in the *basileia theou* (kingdom of God) movement associated with Jesus, of the memories of her that we find in the empty tomb narratives, and of the development of those memories in apocryphal works. What I mean is that they block our exploration of ways that the erotic and mystical can be associated with Mary Magdalene when we employ a sense of the erotic as described by Audre Lorde: a deep source of power, knowledge, joy, bravery, and energy to change the world.[8] This understanding of the erotic does not reduce it to sex and does not exclude sex (married, unmarried, heterosexual, homosexual). It allows us to speak of erotic asceticism, erotic friendship, erotic understanding, erotic courage in the face of conflict and death, erotic egalitarianism. erotic challenging of what we call gender roles, eros without domination.[9] As Jeff Kripal writes, the erotic is 'a dimension of human experience that is simultaneously related both to the physical and emotional experience of sexuality and to the deepest ontological levels of religious experience'.[10]

To turn now to the canonical texts. Scholars disagree heartily on how the few references to Mary Magdalene are to be interpreted, how they developed, what historical information, if any, they contain. While these texts are no longer accepted as simply presenting 'what happened', for some of us this does not mean that they are fiction with no historical value or interest at all. I maintain that it is possible to draw from them a reconstruction of 'what happened' that is, at least, historically plausible. As I reconstruct it, Mary Magdalene was a Jew

8. Audre Lorde, 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 53-59 (55).

9. Feminist conversations about domination fantasies, abuse, pornography, prostitution, intercourse, and the erotic are relevant here. See Drucilla Cornell (ed.), *Feminism and Pornography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Margaret Reynolds (ed.), *Erotica: Women's Writing from Sappho to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990).

10. Jeff Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn, 1998), p. 23. Contrast the understanding of the erotic in the equation of Mary Magdalene with eros in romanticism and symbolism, a connection explored further in the twentieth century (see Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* [London: Harper Collins, 1993], p. 365).

from Galilee, a member of the *basileia* movement associated with Jesus, prominent at least after his death. I judge it likely that with other women she was present at his crucifixion. I think that the body of Jesus was given the shameful burial of a criminal, in an unidentifiable place, witnessed by the women. It is reasonable to me that they would note the burial site, and that they would return to it, to the dishonored body, which could not be found. The absence of the body, interpreted through the lens of developing Jewish apocalyptic/wisdom beliefs and praxis, became the catalyst for resurrection faith.[11] Mary Magdalene and/or others communicated that belief in terms of her seeing and being spoken to by angels and by the risen Jesus. She was therefore likely a major source of information later about the movement and Jesus' death, and an originator of the Christian resurrection faith. There is enough tension, contradiction, and blurring of her role in the Gospels to indicate that her testimony was early on challenged and diminished by some in the movement. But her testimony was not suppressed entirely.

Scholars are used to finding only traces of women's lives and contributions, used to learning how to read and fill in the gaps when possible. Yet in the Gospel texts about the crucifixion and resurrection there is something very strange. No, *only* traces and gaps. One woman in particular, Mary Magdalene, appears in what seems to be an important and even crucial role, even if it is quickly submerged or blurred in the subsequent narratives. Her role is treated, however, by most biblical scholars (for a variety of reasons) as though it is not crucial; rather, appearances of the risen Jesus to men are regarded as the foundation of belief in the resurrection. This intrigues me.

I think Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is correct to say that 'the disagreements between different readings…can be adjudicated only in a rhetorical-political paradigm of inquiry and not in a "literalist" scientific one'.[12] I agree with her also that refusal to reflect on our own ideological and theological interests, and the restoration of historical positivism, correspond to political conservatism and promote scientific fundamentalism. As Jeffrey Kripal says, the quest for 'what actually

11. I accept the empty tomb as historical because I do not think it commits me to a belief that the resurrection was thought of as the resuscitation of a corpse. Rather, it is compatible with a lost or stolen corpse, the mystery of the unknown fate of a corpse, the destruction of a corpse; it is also compatible with belief in exaltation/ascent.

12. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1998), p. 205.

happened' 'can sometimes (maybe often) hide a lurking fundamentalism or literalism, as if one can only be religious [or, I would add, scholarly] by knowing exactly what happened in the past in order to deny that one is in fact responsible for creating new meanings in the present'.[13] This would apply to work done under the banner of feminism, for example, on the creation myths which posit an original moment of perfect egalitarianism, from which subsequent history is a 'fall'.

My aim or motivation or hope in my study of the women at the crucifixion and tomb is not to assert the historical reliability of the empty tomb tradition in the hopes of asserting the primacy of women's witness to the resurrection. The primacy of Mary Magdalene's witness to the resurrection is not a radical claim; it sits there in full sight in a naïve or fundamentalist reading of the text, and it can be asserted within a sexist framework, as in the Vatican document *Mulieris dignitatem*. Nor is it simply to follow and asses the evidence plausibly, while denying / suppressing / or at least controlling my own political interests so that they do not impact or influence the paths followed or the results attained. I can *not* assert or demonstrate; and I cannot separate my interest from my analysis. I can only offer *one* feminist reconstruction of the Empty Tomb tradition.

My aim is to offer a reconstruction that (1) accounts for the depiction in some texts of Mary Magdalene's key participation and agency in the movement; (2) accounts for the distortion of that depiction, or lack of it elsewhere; and (3) is a bridge to the radically different portrayals of her in so-called gnostic/apocryphal literature and in legend. Robert Price has said that the scraps about Mary Magdalene in the Christian Testament give him the impression that these details are the lingering after-echoes of some great explosion.[14] Those after-echoes continue in the legends and in the later portrayals. I want to reconstruct that explosion.[15]

My interpretative framework and presuppositions are feminist. In this framework it is possible to place women as agents at the center of historiography, and to understand them as makers as well as bearers of

13. J. Kripal, 'Serpent's Gift', unpublished manuscript.

14. Robert M. Price, 'Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?', *Grail* 6 (1990), pp. 54-76 (56).

15. Adrienne Rich expresses the desire that motivates such work: 'I came to see that the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail… // …the thing I came for: / the wreck and the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth' (*Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1071–72* [New York: Norton, 1974], pp. 22-24).

meaning. Feminist historical critical and literary analysis is grounded in wo/men's varied experiences of oppression and historical agency. Assumption of the agency and intelligence of wo/men *and* of the force and strategies of oppression is given methodological priority; probabilities and reconstructions are accepted that allow for these. This framework determines to a certain extent what is deemed logical, reasonable, possible.

Feminist historiography's educated assumption is that an androcentric telling and stereotypes, and centuries of androcentric interpretation, have garbled and diminished and all but erased the contribution of wo/men. This directs us to read gaps and slippages, to map out ancient and contemporary strategies of oppression and resistance, to be interested in subtexts. Feminist criticism does not pretend to be objective in the disinterested sense, but it aims to be fair and to have a say in what is fair. It is work done to empower social change and wo/men's liberation.

I want to identify two important assumptions that inform my treatment of the Empty Tomb. The first is related to how I think about the women. I take it for granted that there was nothing unique about the presence of wo/men in the *basileia* movement associated with Jesus. My study is focused on these women; it is *not* focused on Jesus, on what he said or what he did that relates or does not relate to women. I am persuaded by the view that the *basileia* movement was one of 'shared prophecy'[16] that was focused not on Jesus, but on the *basileia* of God.

I concentrate on the moment in the story where Mary Magdalene is prominent, central, apparently necessary (in a literary sense at least): at the crucifixion and empty tomb where she is depicted as an agent. Could or should I locate this foundation and catalyst at some place other than the Empty Tomb? Why would I when here, in terms of narrative flow, is the first flash of resurrection faith and where, from a historical perspective, it is logical for the women who have witnessed the execution to be. The central role of Mary Magdalene in these narratives, her importance and significance as a leader in early Christianity, obligates us to reconstruct what sources and dimensions of her leadership we can: to follow the smoke to the fire.

16. Mary Rose D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing "Real" Women', in *Women and Christian Origins* (ed. Ross Shepherd Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 105-28 (122-25); see also Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 266-67.

I cannot focus on Mary Magdalene without noticing that her agency appears obscured or blurred in the canonical texts themselves: for example, in Mark it is blurred by her fearful silence, disobeying the command to tell; in the other Gospels by lack of response to her message, and by the dramatic prominence of subsequent scenes with Jesus authorizing and sending men to evangelize. I read the lack of treatment of gender issues, the lack of (or very few[17]) depictions of women's leadership in the ministry period, and the minimizing of Mary Magdalene in the canonical texts as not just characteristic of androcentric writing in general, but as an indication that her participation and that of other women in the pre-gospel and Gospel periods *already* caused dissension; that she and other women were being marginalized and their traditions were in the process of being eliminated.[18] Thus their memories were distorted even in the earliest communities.

The second assumption is related to how I think about first-century CE Judaisms. I take for granted that the *basileia* movement is best understood within the larger context of first-century CE Judaisms. This influences both my historical reconstruction, and determines what I think is historically possible for its earliest participants and writers to imagine, expect, believe, experience, claim, express—each of these verbs significant. Our knowledge of the presence of women in Jewish groups (the Essenes at Qumran, the Therapeutae, the Pharisees) is growing, becoming more refined.[19] This increases our scope for thinking about how *women* might have participated in the work of the *basileia* movement (its thinking, study, hopes, expectations, practices, in leadership and non-leadership roles) as well as what role they may have played at and after the death of Jesus.

17. There are exceptional women: the Syro-Phoenician in Mark (Canaanite in Matthew); the Samaritan woman and Martha of Bethany in John.

18. In the interests of space, I am bypassing here scholarly discussions about whether Mary Magdalene and the other women should be seen historically as itinerants travelling with the men, or as sympathizers settled in towns; whether they participated as fully as men did or were only in domestic-like support roles or in the role of wealthy patrons; whether they were motivated by gratitude for personal healing or by other reasons/emotions; whether the women and men worked together or whether there was a gender segregation; whether outsiders, especially the Roman government, could have seen them as full members. I am also bypassing here questions of Jesus' understanding of the presence of Mary Magdalene and the other women.

19. See essays by Taylor, Ilan, and others in Schaberg, Bach, and Fuchs (eds.), *On the Cutting Edge*.

It is within the context of first-century CE Judaisms that we also find contexts for understanding the Empty Tomb. There are empty tombs in Hellenistic translation stories and missing bodies and/or empty tombs also in stories of Moses and Elijah. An empty tomb is compatible with the mystery of the unknown fate or destruction of a corpse and with belief in exaltation/ascent. In post-holocaust and post 9/11 contexts, an empty tomb evokes scattered ashes and pulverization. These also invite us to take a second look at these empty tomb texts. Resurrection language was fluid; while it is impossible to say what a first-century Palestinian Jew *must* have held with regard to the fate of the body of Jesus, believed to be vindicated, resurrected, we can imagine some of the possibilities as suggested by the narratives of the empty tomb. In this regard, I believe Elaine Pagels says rightly that 'Without visions and revelations…the Christian movement would not have begun'.[20]

I see the movement as egalitarian, with deep roots in Jewish egalitarian impulses and based on the covenantal tradition of Israel as interpreted and lived by women and non-elite men. I also see the movement as religious/political, drawing on Jewish apocalyptic/wisdom traditions that are utopian, revolutionary, and activist.[21] I assume the influence of Hebrew Bible texts and traditions (read, heard, discussed, prayed, memorized, debated), that these would be exerted at every stage and would be *more* influential than any other (Greek or non-Jewish) traditions and patterns of thought. I do *not* think the fact that the crucifixion and resurrection are shot through with allusions to and quotations from the Hebrew Bible, especially the psalms, means (a) that they are fiction or prophecy historicized,[22] or (b) that the narratives (or the traditions behind them) are the products of only male scribal activity. What Fishbane calls 'the exegetical imagination' is not limited to men or to the literate. There is no reason to limit knowledge of and imaginative, creative use of biblical traditions to men only; whether or not women were official leaders in the Palestinian synagogues of the time, or served as leaders in Galilean village

20. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 89.

21. Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 269-72.

22. I also do not draw a hard and fast line between history and fiction, or between discovery and creativity. Susan Lochrie Graham and Stephen Moore ask if 'the historical is an outgrowth of the textual, the factual an outgrowth of the fictional?' They respond, 'What if the textual were *also* an outgrowth of the historical, the fictional *also* an outgrowth of the factual?' ('The Quest of the New Historical Jesus', *BibInt* 5 [1997], pp. 438-64 [448-49]).

assemblies, they heard the readings, participated actively in discussions (public or private), and made their own contributions.[23]

Some scholars have drawn attention to a possible lament tradition of women in connection *not* with an empty tomb, or the resurrection faith, but with mourning the dead Jesus. However, the lament tradition that has left its imprint on the texts is that of the Hebrew Bible: laments that invariably involve the stunning turn of mood from agony to praise,[24] from distress to relief.[25] This turn is so characteristically Israelite that some would distinguish biblical laments from laments of other kinds, from funeral songs which stress tragic reversal.[26] How the sufferer gets from distress to relief has been explained variously: for example, as the result of a deliverance oracle spoken by an authorized member of the community, or the articulation of the name of Yahweh. In each case, however, it is always a speech act, not a product of reflection. As Brueggemann says, 'imaginative speech does not begin anew but utilizes and works within the frameworks and patterns that are deep within the mind, heart and liturgy of the community'.[27] I see aspects of apocalyptic faith, the 'mother' of resurrection faith, as an intensification of the lament form, of the 'turn' from distress to relief.[28]

I propose that historically we can posit a 'somebody' to perform the speech act that has to do with belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: to perform it, to begin it. In my reconstruction, this speech act is performed by Jewish women. Their raw grief and trauma, even their more ritualized grief, would make use of traditional words (although not confine itself to them). Mary Magdalene does this in

23. See here the work of Antoinette Clark Wire, *Holy Lives, Holy Deaths: A Close Hearing of Early Jewish Storytellers* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

24. With one exception, Ps. 88.

25. See Walter Brueggemann, *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), pp. 8-12, 35-37; Joachim Begrich, 'Das priesterliche Heilsorakel', *ZAW* 52 (1934), pp. 81-92; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 49. In addition see Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (ed. P.D. Miller; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 72-73, for his summary of the theories of Begrich, Gerstenberger, Kuchler, Frost, and Wevers on what action or transaction it is that moves the speaker to a 'new orientation'.

26. For examples of funeral songs at the time of death in the Hebrew Bible see 2 Sam. 1.9-17; Amos 5.2; Jer. 9.17-22 (Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, pp. 12, 87).

27. Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 79.

28. With respect to this point, against Brueggemann: he suggests that later hints about resurrection in apocalyptic literature may be a grasping for assurance when the forms no longer carry the load (*The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, p. 96).

the Gospels of John and Luke and is presumed to have done so in Matthew. This enables me to consider death–resurrection as a continuum at the initial stage of the tradition, not a separate act of memory nor a fictional construction; the horror and the hope together, in an instant, rather than a drawn out process, evolving over years *toward* belief in resurrection (although, of course, that belief, once articulated, developed over decades and centuries). To put it another way, I propose seeing the initial resurrection faith in a flash, not in slow motion. I place it, this flash, with the witnesses to the crucifixion, especially Mary Magdalene.

I see this *basileia* movement as part of the stream of Jewish mysticism, which in the first century CE was apocalyptic. Familiar with the idea of ascent, experienced in visionary practices, members of the movement might expect, desire, and claim things that boggle our imaginations. From the apocalyptic/wisdom dimensions of the movement emerges the Danielic figure/image of the Human One ('the son of man'), a powerful political symbol understood and developed as a corporate figure, who suffers and is (to be) vindicated. In my reconstruction, this figure provides a center and a language for the expectations, the unity, and the inclusiveness of the group, men and women, and for the modification of social roles, both before and after the death of Jesus.[29] The figure of Wisdom, who sends out her friends, her children, her prophets (Wis. 7.27; Lk. 5.35; 11.49; 21.15) functioned to empower women's prophetic agency, alongside that of men.[30] Wisdom also brings the *sophos* to immortality and to the kingdom (Wis. 6.19-20; cf. Dan. 12.1-3 on the *maskilim*). Both of these figures arising from theological imagination, the Human One and Woman Wisdom, were decisive factors in the egalitarianism of this *basileia* movement, and in its faith in vindication.

29. Phillip B. Munoa III argues that Perpetua's metamorphosis into a 'man' in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* 10.7 can be understood in terms of Dan. 7: she is patterned after the 'one like a son of man' ('Jesus, the *Merkavah*, and the Martyrdom in Early Christian Tradition', *JBL* 121 [2002], pp. 303-25 [312 n. 61]). See Appendix C in Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 363-65.

30. L. Irigaray proposes that a woman needs a representation of her own (a goddess) so that she can be mirrored and imagine her own infinite (*Sexes and Genealogies* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1987], p. 62). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that although 'Jewish wisdom literature was shaped to serve the kyriarchal interests of elite men', it nevertheless expresses 'the need of wo/men for a powerful divine savior figure' (*Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* [New York: Continuum, 1994], Chapter 5).

The resurrection faith as I understand it in this context has to do with justice for the whole person, for the body, for the corporate, inclusive Human One, of which in one stream of understanding Jesus was an instance and perhaps a focal point.[31] My proposal is that the movement's integration of study and work and mystical experience was preparation for the earliest attempts to make sense of the death of Jesus, in terms of resurrection. Innovation, based on the Human One traditions, helped explain how his death was grasped and his resurrection believed in. I see the bond between Jesus, others, and the Human One as the basis of the conviction that God vindicated Jesus, articulated in traditions associated with the Empty Tomb. The experience of ascent to God in and as the Human One (grounded in Dan. 7–12) would involve an incorporation that expanded 'identity' beyond the individual, involve struggle against injustice, and a belief in vindication, including the 'waking' of those who are wise (the *maskilim*), even those who 'sleep in the dust of the earth' (Dan. 12.2). Over time, in some groups (but not in the group in which the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* was produced) the understanding of the Human One was narrowed to refer exclusively to Jesus. The intertwined Wisdom traditions shaped by theological imagination empowered people in communities such as Corinth to live their baptismal commitments and resurrection faith, in an ecstatic appreciation of shared vindication (of the living as well as the dead) that rejected privileged statuses. Over time even the memory of Woman Wisdom has been nearly erased from Western Christianity and images of God narrowed to only male images. The narrowing, however, like patriarchy, has never been complete, never completely successful.

Drawing on Danielic tradition of the Human One along with the tradition of Elijah's translation (2 Kgs 2.1-18), I see the emptiness of the tomb as the trigger of resurrection faith. The emptiness is not demanded by or created by the resurrection faith, nor is it a response to that faith. Emptiness is rather an inspiration of that faith, an occasion for insight. The traumatic grief of the women, grounded in a belief in injustice done to Jesus and ultimate justice for the Human One, produces the theological leap, the claim that resurrection *had* taken place, had begun to take place. In the Empty Tomb tradition, we find the stimulus for the Easter faith *and* the stimulus for different traditions concerning Mary Magdalene.

31. On the idea found in the *Gospel of Thomas* that 'the divine light Jesus embodied is shared by humanity since we are all made in the image of God', an idea that later is judged as a heresy, see Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, pp. 41-47.

Who is there *at the death* and *at the tomb* of the historical Jesus tells us much more than that women attend deaths. Who is there at the empty tomb when, as I have reconstructed it, 'resurrection' is first articulated as having happened, may tell us something about the women's profound participation in that movement. This can become a focal point for talking about women and the historical Jesus. But if and when you start taking the study of women seriously, your understanding of men changes. You stop projecting onto them, and they are reduced to their actual size. Study of women will challenge a number of conclusions about Jesus that many scholars take for granted.

My reconstruction accepts as possible that women are a primary source of the resurrection faith; accepts as possible that the pagan authors who were convinced 'that female initiative was central to Christianity's development',[32] were reflecting not just second-century controversy and ongoing ambivalence about women's roles, but were indirectly acknowledging women's active and creative participation from the beginning as learners and teachers, as thinkers, exegetes, visionaries, prophets, in a stream of living Jewish tradition. The more we reconstruct aspects of the historical Mary Magdalene and of the Jewish movement in which she participated, the more we reconstruct aspects of her after-image in forms of Christianity *other* than that which won out in the West, the more she becomes a figure of empowerment. Not just the first of Jesus' disciples to bear witness to the resurrection, but a creator of resurrection faith and a leader in an early form or forms of Christianity which I think have much to teach us in the twenty-first century as we approach a time in which the incorporation of women's (wo/men's) leadership, ideas, needs, concerns, priorities surge into the structures of religion and politics and change them, hopefully for the better.

32. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 134, 250.

I Am Bagatti*

The graduate student is surprised
by the sweet courtesy
of the monk who draws open the door
at the Franciscan Monastery of the Flagellation
in the Muslim Quarter, on Al Mujahideen Road

This is the museum of the
Studium biblicum franciscanum,
visits by appointment;
she has no appointment.
An enormous bougainvillea foams in the courtyard.

She has come to see
the artifacts of a lost possibility
of lost interpretations and symbols,
'from a historical-religious situation
that has now vanished'.

He leads her down the corridor
to the room where the ossuaries are
from Dominus Flevit.
The *taw* is traced on one name in charcoal,
the *chi–ro* on another.

Here are the amulets from Khirbet Kilkish near Hebron
where the law prohibiting images was not observed:
the little faces, with the *taw* again
or with the Z for *zoe*
'indicating a wish for life'.

Little human figures
marked on the forehead, the shoulders, the clothing
with secret signs
'whose indecipherment was sought'
to preserve the hidden mysteries and so aid the dead.

* This poem first appeared in *Biblicon* 2 (1997), pp. 67-68.

Letters and numbers in inscriptions
placed at the end of names
of breaking up words,
letters out of place and alignment
scratched or carved

'at first sight without reason,
said due to the inattention or ignorance of stoneworkers.
But by the same hands,
and in inscriptions which are exact and elegant
where one would not expect them.'

Here is the little branch or little plant,
the ladder the blown rosette
the boat-ark the seven steps
the cavity

and the birds so many birds
surely souls of the dead
drawn with three toes
as children draw them, like chickens.

He takes her then to another room across the hall
to a collection of stuffed animal freaks:
strange snakes and frogs
and a two-headed goat.
He is most proud of the two-headed goat
and goes on and on about it.

She urges they go back to archaeology,
and asks does he know of Bellarmino Bagatti,
the one who discovered these strange artifacts
and wrote on what was called
the Church from the Circumcision,
the first Jewish Christians of Jerusalem and the Galilee
and the trans-Jordan.

'I am Bagatti!'
he beams.

He is so delighted to be
who he is
and to surprise her.

His eyes are luminous brown pools
his delight is stronger
than the years of field work and study alone
stronger than the death that lies before him,
an agony of which monks will whisper,
stronger than all the forces ranged against his scholarship,
and even its oblivion.

I am Bagatti!

Part V

Breaking Silence

Breaking the Silence*

I have never given a sermon before. Never been asked to, never been allowed to. I am a member—at least *I* say I am—of the Roman Catholic church, 1.1 billion strong, that does not ordain women and does not permit women to preach… Aside from this prohibition, I am also a feminist biblical scholar… We are seen as man-hating, male-bashing, family destroying, whose scholarship is biased, subjective, too optimistic, just plain wrong; not worth reading or debating. In addition, I am one of those currently not permitted to lecture or be honored at Catholic institutions (and who is unwelcome also at some other institutions)… I mention this not just because giving a sermon is a novelty for me, but because the first thing that came to mind in preparing it was silence, or rather, silencing. I was and am tempted to end right here, just go sit down and let us listen to the silence of millions of wo/men; hear the boiling up of their ideas, their interpretations, their genius, their frustration, their hopes, their questions, all unspoken… What is it that many women want to say that is so unwelcome? Well, for one thing, that most of the women and children alive today will live and die in poverty. That we do not want this sort of world. That we must act to change it.

Inside the silence, though, there is this buzzing, this laughing, this murmuring. When the official voices cease or at least cease their domineering cant, we can hear better—as in a John Cage composition—the birdsong, the traffic, the wind, our own breathing, and our beating hearts. We can hear something of the past that was *not* silenced, and something happening in our own very interesting, crucial time. We hear some shifting, some cracking open, maybe, hopefully, some great joy present and future.

* This is excerpted from a homily delivered at Christ Church Cathedral, Houston, Texas for the Feast Day of St Mary Magdalene, July 24, 2005.

Book Burning
(Excerpts)

In al-Qasr in the winter of '45
Muhammad 'Ali dumped the codices
and the loose papyrus leaves
on the straw next to the oven:

thirteen books bound in soft leather
from the reddish earthen jar
buried (they say now) by a monk of St Pachomius,
at the foot of Jabal al-Tarif,

luminous range.

The jar's mouth the monk had closed
with a red bowl (Robinson has it now)
and sealed with bitumen
silencing more than fifty tractates,

snatching them from the heresy hunters,
Athanasius and his gang,
sixteen hundred years ago
when this was Chenoboskia.

Then Muhammad avenged his father's death
by the murder of Ahmed Isma'il.
then he hacked off his limbs and
and then he ate his heart.

His mother 'Umm Ahmad
admits that she burned
much of that papyrus in the oven
along with the straw, to kindle the fire.

And then because the avenging continued
against the al-Samman clan
and the police came searching for weapons
and who knows? The jinn from the jar
were somehow involved,

angry that it had been smashed with the mattock,
angry to have jumped from monastery fire to kitchen fire,
—the smoke and the ignorance and the avenging all the same,
theologians, or clans, all the same—
then some of the books
were given to the Coptic priest who could not read them
but his brother-in-law Raghib Andarawus, the schoolteacher,
teacher of history,
began to read.

And others read…
Governments were falling and rising,
they read during air raids, a coup d'état,
during entrepreneurial intrigue,
academic rivalry,
and repeated confiscations.
They read in Paris, Manhattan, Jerusalem,
in Baltimore, Utrecht, Messina, Cambridge,
in Münster, Berlin, Quebec, and Claremont.

What was left
moved (not all together) from Tot Mina's drawer at the Coptic Museum
to the shop of Albert Eid the Belgian antiquities dealer in the Khan Khalil section,
to the University of Michigan, no deal,
to a Brussels safety deposit box;
seven years in a suitcase at the Department of Antiquities,
tied with ropes, they had to use ant spray when they opened it;
one codex was presented in Zurich to Carl Gustav Jung
for his 78th birthday;
there was talk of presentation to the pope,
more confiscations, some deaths, UNESCO…

At Pahor Labib's desk at the Coptic Museum in the 1950s:
Cairo light comes in through the carved wood screens.
There is the photo of a child, ashtrays, a pen, and a codex under plexiglass;
Odd reflections on the desktop.
Labib holds a magnifying glass that distorts his tie.
Quispel pokes with his pencil.
Puech sits sadly, his wedding ring gleaming; he might be looking down at a casket.

The clock says 2pm.

What was burnt by 'Umm Ahmad
Escaped them all.

Sparks rose like souls out of the oven
Into the Egyptian air
Past the powers and forces that they say keep us here
In this world they say is evil.

Some of these powers are named:
Trauma of death
Ignorance
Wrathful wisdom.

'These are the secret words
Which the living Jesus spoke…'
We read,
'He who is near me is near the fire…'
The words of Jesus loom up out of obscurity, says Quispel,
'Are they authentic?'

But listen rather to the fire itself
That rushes through these fragments:
'[…] philosopher […] they are not able to […] philosopher […] world […]
[…] her […] begot him […] think that […]
[…]forget…[…]…son…[…] and you o[…]…you
God […] manifest […] those who will know [him]
[…] women [and men of this kind…no one]
[and they will] take pity on these […] who have […]
Fear […] mysteries in […]

It is the noise of the fire the Christians set
in the library in Alexandria
the sound of the unspeakable fire our century set
that ate handwriting on other sacred scrolls
and then the hands themselves.

(O no. Were you afraid I would start talking about this
Even when the circumstances are totally different, there is no reason at all to bring this up?)

13

TOLERATING THE VOICES OF WOMEN*

I am a feminist biblical scholar. As a *feminist* biblical scholar, I represent a voice that has *not* been tolerated, by religions or by states, and even to some extent, by religious studies in the academy. In this essay, I want to make a simple point: that the voices of women have not been tolerated in 'official' religion or in politics from antiquity to the present. My second point, however, is that those voices were never effectively silenced and are now speaking boldly to whoever can listen.

To begin, I think it is important to ask three questions: (1) Who is doing the tolerating? (2) What is being tolerated? (3) Who is included in discussions of these two questions? I represent those who are mostly not a part of 'official' conversations about tolerance and toleration. I also represent those who do not want a part in this conversation as it has been conducted, who cannot take part in it as it has been conducted. Virginia Woolf said famously, '[A]s a woman I have no country [no state]. As a woman I want no country. As woman my country is the whole world.'[1] Following her, we can say: As a woman I have no religion. I am not Jew or Christian or Muslim or Hindu, Buddhist, or anything AND as a woman I AM a Jew, and a Christian and a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, and all the rest.

Gerda Lerner and others have shown that there is a thousand-year tradition of women writing about religion, interpreting texts on their own, creating their own theologies.[2] It is a submerged, lost-and-found-again tradition. Tradition with little or no impact on the way the business of religion is conducted. Over against it stands the tradition produced by the male half of the population. Cynthia Ozick labels as

* This paper was originally presented at Wayne State University as part of a conference, 'From Religious Toleration to Civic Tolerance: Religion and the State from Antiquity to the Present'.

1. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1963), p. 109.

2. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

'a plain whooping lie' the statement of Adin Steinsaltz that the Talmud 'is the collective endeavor of the entire Jewish people'. 'The truth', she writes, 'is that the Talmud is the collective endeavor not of the entire Jewish people, but only of its male half… What we have had is a Jewish half-genius. That is not enough for the people who choose to hear the voice of the Lord of History. We have been listening with only half an ear, speaking with only half a tongue, and never understanding that we have made ourselves partly deaf and partly dumb.'[3] Dominant Jewish traditions, Christian tradition, Islamic traditions—the sacred texts and the interpretations—are the creation of only the male half.

What do women think of this truncated tradition? Denise Carmody puts it this way in her study of what 'world' religions have to say about women, and of women's own religions (as far as those can even be studied): 'Standing at the margins, women have tended to learn in their bones that much dogma is bunk, that most power is pocked, that life's great treasures are simple things like a decent home and large stores of affection'.[4] Bunk. Religious studies is the study of bunk.

In the last twenty-five years feminist scholars in growing numbers across the globe have studied this bunk, exposed it, discussed what is of value in its traditions, and both found and created alternatives. I want to be clear here that I am not espousing a form of essentialism that celebrates women's innate moral purity, peacefulness and spiritual superiority, while condemning male aggression, and destructive behavior as though women have and have had no part in that. But I do hold that the roles to which women have been assigned and in which they have been confined, and the violence they have endured—that is, women's historical experience—has provided them with opportunities to develop perspectives and strengths grounded in compassion by performing acts of caring for other human beings and resisting violence. And the voices of this history, when they are the voices not of isolated individuals but of a critical mass, are voices that need to be heard, not just tolerated.

The study of women's history reveals a clear link between intolerance, war, and control of women. In a recent editorial, Robin Morgan observed,

3. Cynthia Ozick, 'Notes toward Finding the Right Question', *Lilith* 6 (1979), pp. 19-29 (25).

4. Denise Lardner Carmody, *Women and World Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice–Hall, 2nd edn, 1989), p. 233.

> History may define this era as one of religious wars, given the numerous fanaticisms… But religious fundamentalists are political movements with revealingly interchangeable agendas. Women are always their first prey, because women stand at the political, economic, and psychological intersection of society's core issues: sexuality, reproduction, and family structure. To control the population, you must control women's bodies.[5]

Writing a century earlier, Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage identified religion and the Bible as the great forces set against women's political and social emancipation. Cady Stanton was persuaded that the greatest barrier to women's emancipation was in the superstitions of the church: sentimentality, stupidity, fear of the unknown. She also thought, naively, that if she could demonstrate that the subjection of women was not divinely ordained, men would be more willing to admit women to an equal place in government, and that women would feel less hesitant in asserting their own rights. This anti-fundamentalist position had long-lasting resonance. She came to see that the Bible was sexist at its core, a dangerous, not irrelevant book.

For this reason she insisted on publishing the *Woman's Bible*, a pastiche of comments by women on a number of texts. With this publication, Cady Stanton lost the support of her colleagues in the National-American Woman Suffrage Association, who found her too radical and in a formal declaration made it known that they had no official connection with the so-called *Woman's Bible*. The President of the organization, her lifelong friend Susan B. Anthony, spoke against this resolution, but to no avail.[6] They voted 53 to 41 to adopt the resolution. Getting in the last word (typically), Cady Stanton had this very resolution and report appended to the *Woman's Bible*, and then, ironically, added a quote from Jn 8.32—'the truth shall make you free'—using the Bible against the defenders of the Bible who were objecting to her criticism of the Bible.

For a century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was virtually dropped from history. She is not mentioned in an article by Marcus Borg, 'Profiles in Scholarly Courage: Early Days of New Testament Criticism'.[7] Her contribution is not listed with those of Thomas Paine, Gotthold Lessing, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, David Friedrich Strauss, and Charles Briggs (whose heresy trial took place in New York in 1893,

5. Robin Morgan, 'Long Memories', *Ms* (Summer 2002), p. 1.

6. Anthony's own belief was that the root of the subjection of women was due to their being denied the vote and access to political power.

7. *BR* 10 (1994), pp. 40-45.

just before the publication of the *Woman's Bible*). 'In our time', Borg writes, because of the pervasive secularization and pluralization of the modern world, 'biblical criticism is no longer perceived as a threat to culture itself. In our time, when biblical criticism IS experienced as threatening, it is a threat to private religious belief. Controversy over the Bible has become a personal and sometimes sectarian matter, not an issue that vexes the culture as a whole.'[8] In the early days of the Enlightenment, he says, it was not so:

> Biblical criticism was cultural criticism. It required both intellect and courage. To be able to 'see' from a vantage point outside of the conventions of culture is an intellectual accomplishment in any age. To be willing to face the cultural outrage engendered by such a point of view is the stuff of which the heroic is made. Whatever their personal faults and limitations, the [male] pioneers of biblical criticism were heroes of the Enlightenment.[9]

Only someone who is not paying attention to what women were and are doing in his own field could have written this. Today feminist critics appreciate Elizabeth Cady Stanton's intellectual accomplishment and its challenge to undertake a deeper cultural criticism as well as action aimed at creating a fundamental change in the structure of human society. A century later, Cady Stanton has found her intellectual descendants: two major publications in biblical studies (one American and one international) marked the centennial of her *Woman's Bible*.[10] Now even Ken Burns and his PBS audience have finally heard of her.[11]

The opponents of women's movements have clearly understood that the aim is to change structures and institutions: family, religion, education, the economic system; a change in men's roles and in the entire fabric of society. Questions of divorce, pregnancy, abortion, birth control, poverty, and now heterosexism are at the fore. Gradually advocacy for human rights and the human family (especially with the contributions of womanist voices) and a call for a global perspective along with global action have become the focus of studies in

8. Borg, 'Profiles in Courage', p. 45.
9. Borg, 'Profiles in Courage', p. 45.
10. See Carol Ann Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998); Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (eds.), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup, 262; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
11. Ken Burns, 'Not for Ourselves Alone', PBS 1999.

religion as well as in other fields.[12] There is increasing awareness of the interlocking structures of domination and oppression, and of the need for a variety of perspectives and voices to dismantle these. Now we speak of wo/men intending to include all women and non-elite men.

Everywhere male-dominated legislatures, courts, industries, educational institutions, and religious institutions have failed to meet the need for radical change, and have ridiculed and censored the voices of women. This has left three options open to feminists: (1) meet the scripture-based sexist 'head on'; (2) point out those parts of scriptures or tradition that seem to favor the equality of the sexes; (3) ignore religion altogether. All three approaches have been used in history, the third becoming dominant. Until our time.

What the authors of the *Woman's Bible* were doing in the nineteenth century as they interpreted and reinterpreted merits our attention. First, they were identifying sexism: oppressive texts that stood against their own best knowledge of themselves, their own interests, and their own experience of reality. Second, where they found sexism, they attributed it to (a) an error in translation or (b) misinterpretation or (c) (increasingly) to something wrong with the text, the outlook or ideology of the text; that is, they viewed the 'sacred' text as flawed. Third, they began doing historical and literary criticism, looking at the contexts in which the texts were written, the various viewpoints of different authors, identified different and contradictory perspectives within the text, and considered the applicability or non-applicability of passages and noted tensions and gaps in the texts.

All this work moved them away from fundamentalism. It also moved them—and us—away from positivistic historicism, which, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has insisted, serves conservative interests by (a) giving the impression that the past can be objectively known; and (b) exploring neither the stance of the interpreter nor the ethics of interpretation.[13] They were not trying to reconstruct the past 'as it was', which the new historicism sees, in any case, as an impossibility, and they were conscious of how their own perspectives shaped their interpretations and of their own duty to judge the texts ethically.

Today there is a fruitful dialogue between religious and secular feminist scholars, profoundly addressing issues of feminist classism and racism as well as anti-Judaism. There is preparation underway for feminist Muslim scholars to join with Jewish and Christian feminist

12. See Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

13. *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

scholars in conversation at meetings of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature: self-critical and dodging no issues. By engaging in this dialogue, Western feminist scholars are learning not to impose their solutions or aims. Instead, we have become painfully aware of the failures of Western nations to curb violence against women and the sex-slave trade, and in the case of the United States, to lower the number of maternal and infant deaths, to develop maternal leave, child care, and health policies for all, and so forth. We know that the US government uses international women's issues when it suits them, and ignores them otherwise, internationally and domestically,[14] for example, using its clout (as the Vatican does) to work against reproductive rights for women, undercutting international efforts to use conferences to bolster support for rural health care for poor women at the 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, banning the use of US aid to organizations that provide any information about abortion, and passively accepting world sex trafficking as the status quo.[15] Today the US remains one of seven countries (out of 170) that have failed to ratify the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).[16]

From the other side of the world, we hear the voices of other women expressing similar anger and frustration, such as that of an Afghan woman living in exile in Pakistan and recorded by photographer Fazal Sheikh:

> When our great Islamic revolution succeeded, we thought our day of deliverance had come… Afghanistan was released. But once again women were treated as the goat in the game. These men who think of themselves as the defenders of our faith, as our fathers and brothers sent to protect us, are the same ones who call us 'Honey'. They say: 'Don't come out of your bottle, the flies might touch you'… Over the loudspeakers they announce that fourteen years of holy war has simply been to cover Afghan women in Muslim dress. That, dear brother, dear father and son, I am sure was not the purpose of the holy war. It is time to improve our lot in life and throw off the shackles that have allowed the caravan of civilization and democracy to travel far beyond us.[17]

14. As of 2 June 2012. CEDAW was passed by the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee with a 12–7 vote, but failed to pass the Senate.

15. See Nicholas D. Kristof, 'Bush vs. Women', *New York Times* (16 August 2002), p. A19.

16. The other nations were the Sudan, Somalia, Iran, Nauru, Palau, and Tonga. The US and Somalia were the only United Nations members that refused to sign the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

17. Sarah Boxer, 'Stories Reveal Violence behind Formal Pictures', *New York Times* (4 October 2002), p. B30.

By and large, the feminist conversation on religion travels on a parallel track, neither intersecting with, nor full participants in 'fraternal' ecumenical dialogue (scholarly and clerical), which appears blissfully and ignorantly unaware of the conversations, concerns, and ideas of women. Consider, for example, the collections of essays that are produced at scholarly or religious conferences and summits, which contain few or no essays by women, or include women only as 'respondents'. There are, fortunately, some exceptions: the *Tikkun* conversations, for example, in which Susannah Heschel and Judith Plaskow participate and are leaders.

Contemporary feminist biblical scholarship lives with the ambiguity of the biblical text: an enemy and also an ally of human liberation (and tolerance); a flawed text that requires (and even inspires by its very flaws) our creativity. Notions of inspiration, revelation, authority, and canon give way under pressure of historical information and imagination and radical rethinking. Ancient texts by women and new ones written today explode the canon.

Let me focus for a minute on one very promising study that has relevance to our topic here: study of women in the early Christian community or communities at Corinth in the 50s of the first century CE. We have two canonical letters of Paul to the community (or communities) in Corinth, so it is a relatively well-documented moment and place in history. Through a careful study of Paul's rhetoric, Anne Wire has produced a reconstruction of the theology and practice of Corinthian women prophets whom Paul opposed and attempted to control.[18] What those women (and some men) in Corinth and other communities stood for was a powerful human reality: a continuation of women's prophetic traditions and interpretations, and of apocalyptic/sapiential traditions of resistance and reform; women speaking fearlessly and freely in the assembly; spiritual enthusiasm expressing itself through the experimental breaking down of barriers in the present and in concrete, physical, social, and political ways, not just in spiritual ways oriented to an after-life; democratic procedures in the sense of an open, participatory assembly that was non-hierarchical. Here we encounter an expression of religion that-suffered mightily, but never died out. We are learning to hear these voices, and what they can say to our troubled time.

18. *The Corinthian Women Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Some think, and I try to be among them, that as we become increasingly clear about what is at stake globally when we allow the gross and irrational intolerance of women's voices in religion and politics to continue, the strength of wo/men's voices (inside, outside, and at the margins of religions and governments) will presage massive, positive change. Virginia Woolf, in her notes for the original speech 'Professions for Women', wrote: 'The future [of fiction]…depends very much upon what extent men can be educated to stand free speech in women'.[19] The future still depends on it, or better, I think, on ignoring whether or not they can stand it. As Rosemary Radford Reuther said when she spoke a few years ago at my university concerning fundamentalist Roman Catholicism and women's rights: 'there is a great clash coming, and I wouldn't miss it for the world'.

19. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 109.

14

FEMINISM LASHES BACK*

Backlash, it seems, has been my old companion at least since graduate school in the 1970s, where at Union Theological Seminary in New York I lived with my unasked questions, and encountered one experience of what we would now call sexual harassment. I lived with condescension, no mentoring, and a headache that lasted many years, which I would press up against the cool wall of the stall in the ladies room in the basement. In the midst of this, one afternoon stands out for me: a visit with Bev Harrison, who I had been rightly told would understand and encourage. I want to thank her publicly now, for myself and all the others who made their way to her apartment.

Backlash in the job market in the late '70s and early '80s involved the humiliation of phony interviews whose outcomes had already been decided in favor of white males, but for which I—like other women—provided a statistic in case the EEOC cared to ask. It took the form of hostile attacks at interview lectures. Once I spent twenty minutes of embarrassed fidgeting on a sofa while a Dean took a friendly phone call during my appointment with him; I studied the spines of his books and wondered angrily if I should walk out—I didn't. It took the form of hearing from friendly members of search committees that it was said, 'This one is trouble', because I brought up such things as employment statistics (like 4% tenured female faculty, 51% female students). Information about publishing and grants were withheld as well as recommendations and introductions.

* This paper was delivered at a special session of the joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in 1997 and included a portion of a previously published article, 'A Feminist Contribution to Experience of Historical Jesus Research', *Continuum* 3 (1994) pp. 266-85. This is an edited version of an essay under the same name that was published in *Biblicon* 3 (1998), pp. 45-52.

After being hired at the University of Detroit, I spend thirteen years as the only woman in my department, with few feminist colleagues in other departments, and no success in efforts to influence hiring policies, develop a sexual harassment policy, or introduce a Women's Studies program. I also began to experience a different kind of harassment: the hostile environment kind. I received phone calls, letters, and notes from a particular individual, several beginning 'You passive aggressive patriarchal bitch, why did you… [fill in the blank]'. Presentation of a file containing copies of the letters and notes to the Union and the Dean were met with the response that nothing could be done. 'It sounds to me like he's in love with you', said the Dean.

Over time these forms of backlash began to be countered by companionship with members of the increasingly strong network of feminist scholars and friends at Wayne State University, the University of Windsor, across the country, and around the globe. Into the wasteland flooded the early feminist scholarship and literature, most importantly among them Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's book, *In Memory of Her* (1984). In addition, I began to hear exciting 'breakthrough' presentations by Esther Fuchs and others at the national Society of Biblical Literature meetings.

All of this represented the relatively common experience of feminist scholars during this period. What happened to me next is why I was invited on this panel. In 1987 Harper and Row published my book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, in which I used the standard methods of biblical criticism to examine the New Testament infancy narratives (the first chapters of Matthew and Luke) from the perspectives of feminist thought in order to explore the possibilities of an alternative reading. I argued that behind these texts lies the almost erased tradition not of the virginal conception of Jesus, but of his illegitimate conception, pointing to the law in Deuteronomy concerning the rape or seduction of a betrothed virgin. Without fully recognizing what I was doing, I touched an exposed live wire—which I would have touched anyway, but perhaps with more protection and preparation, had that been available. From the moment of its publication, the book received mainstream as well as scholarly attention, from Ms magazine to the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, from the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* to Chester Brown's comic book *Yummy Fur* (as far as I know Morton Smith and I are the only two biblical scholars whose work has been mentioned in *Yummy Fur*, in its very fine treatment of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew). Over the course of a few years *The Illegitimacy of*

Jesus was dismissed, ridiculed, praised, used, and published in paperback by Crossroad, thanks to Justus George Lawler. The letters came, some hostile, some grateful, and I tried to move on to other projects.

Mention of the book in *Time* magazine, together with my institutional affiliation, brought a sharp rise in the hostile letters, and now phone calls. In 1993, David Crumm, the religion editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, asked to do a profile of me. After talking with him I decided that he would do a careful, balanced job, and give a hearing to basic feminist issues. Ten hours of taped interviews lay behind the piece he produced. Even now this article, and the milk crates of letters and articles it generated, are more difficult for me to read than the cancer journal I kept during my year of chemo fourteen years ago. I have not yet fully processed the jumble of emotions: embarrassment, shame—which I'm embarrassed to have—and anger are primary. (I'm trying to make it the power of anger in the work of love.)

The *Free Press* article included two photos of me, one with two large African-American male students. I was accurately quoted discussing feminism's intellectual and social challenges; the impact of Detroit on my work; and Catholicism's failures. My writing was accurately excerpted. But the profile was constructed in such a way as to portray me as an un-credentialed, loose-cannon feminist, dogmatically preaching 'the gospel according to Jane'. Statements taken out of context, and flip remarks were used by an editor superior to David Crumm in rank in order to hype the piece. The Jesuit Vice-President for Academic Affairs was quoted as defending academic freedom, but insisting that my 'basic teaching…really does cut to the core of our faith. Her interpretation is not the position of this university, and I would say 99 per cent of the people at this university disagree with her.' He also insisted that the university is not a fundamentalist institution (*Detroit Free Press*, 14 February 1993).

This article let loose the wild dogs and I was clearly fair game. The phones began ringing at the university and at my house, as well as at the Archdiocese of Detroit. The mail began to pile up. The Vice-President for public relations told me the university had lost over $200,000 in donations and had been written out of two substantial wills in the first week. One of my friends, an alumnus of the university, said 'a poor university can't afford academic freedom'.

Seven hundred angry phone calls were said to have come in to the administration and Board of Trustees. Many of those fielded by the secretaries and me were hostile: they expressed religious outrage at my

ideas, called me a whore, feminazi, queen of crapola, pseudo-intellectual, delusional, bitch, blasphemer, heretic, a spiritual cancer, Satanic, lesbian, and sicko. They often asked about my ethnic identity, insisted that I had no place on the faculty of a Catholic university, should not be 'honored' as chair of my department, called for my resignation or firing, and in a couple of cases, my death.

The supportive callers asked where they could find the *Illegitimacy* book. These calls were from abused women asking for help, gay men expressing their alienation from the church, young fathers contemplating their daughters' fate, women who felt rage at being silenced, men and women who had hope, or no hope for the future of Christianity, old men with shaky handwriting protesting the second-class status of women, and from other scholars. Many remarked that the article helped them see how the tradition could function to cultivate compassion toward the most powerless members of society.

Asked on cable TV about my 'controversial theories', Roman Catholic Archbishop Adam Maida responded that those who teach in Catholic universities must be faithful to the magisterium of the church, and that he would have to challenge heresy, implying that he would 'cut me off'. An editorial in the student newspaper strongly defended my academic freedom and called for the administration to have the courage to do likewise. Two members of the Board of Trustees then issued a formal statement and gave an interview to the *Michigan Catholic*. They affirmed that the university is 'solidly Catholic' and that they had faith in the 'catholicity' of the Religious Studies department (whose full time members, they did not note, included at the time two Presbyterians, a self-styled 'lapsed Unitarian', a Jew, two Jesuits, a layman of Catholic background, and myself—I am a little hard to classify). They remarked that as a tenured professor I was protected by civil law and university policy against sanctions for holding unpopular views, and that my controversial ideas only became known years after I was hired. Then they added ominously, 'Unless there were indications of a breakdown in professional standards of scholarship, it would not be the business of the university's sponsors to interfere'. My views, they stated, 'will be subject to and balanced by the review and critique of her professional colleagues'. Sources at the university reported to me that a draft of this statement had included the claim, based on a telephone interview with someone who was not named, that my work was not respected by my scholarly peers. Discussion continued in the student newspaper, the *National Catholic Reporter*, *The Wanderer*, and elsewhere.

There was a broad range of reaction at the university. Several faculty members declared themselves in the 'one percent' of those who agreed with me; many said they were shocked by the lack of administrative support; and—most disturbing of all—several said they could not voice their views publicly, because they were not yet tenured and/or hoped for promotion. (When I reported this to the Dean, he said simply, 'I don't believe you'.) Letters supportive of me and attempting to correct misperceptions in the article were sent to the *Free Press* by the one newly hired, untenured woman in my department, Gloria Albrecht, and by directors of the Ethics Institute (Leonard Weber), Student Life (Jeff McDowell), and Campus Ministry (Tom McGuire). The finally founded Women's Studies program judged it more prudent, in view of its extreme financial vulnerability, to say nothing. The Religious Studies department was also silent. The President of the university did not return my phone calls. A few professors let me know that with the bad publicity, I had endangered the jobs of all the faculty employed by the university and had hurt the university's image.

This story goes on and on; it makes me queasy to tell it. Two members of the Philosophy department began attacking the Religious Studies department in the *Michigan Catholic*. A letter from Archbishop Maida was read from pulpits and an article published by him in parish bulletins. He reassured those troubled by my 'personal and professional opinions regarding various Church teachings', by elaborating his understanding of church teaching on the virginity of Mary: she was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. He stressed that this teaching has contemporary relevance with respect to the controversies over assisted suicide and abortion rights. 'Morality and dogma clearly and directly interconnect and interrelate'. A 'representative sample' of several dozen letters to the *Michigan Catholic* applauded Maida for his courage and dedication, reminded readers of the similar case involving the Catholic University's tolerance of Charles Curran and of Rome's successful demand for his ouster. Two offers that I heard of were made to pay my salary on the condition that I not teach, offers that were not passed on to me. Friendships shifted dramatically, and some were lost. I resigned as department chair. The AAUP sent in a professor from California and sponsored a public panel on my case and academic freedom.

Outside university and church circles, many regarded the flap with bemused or irritated puzzlement. 'Who in their right mind would care about whether Mary was a virgin or the Magdalene a whore? There are important justice issues here in Detroit.' Recognizing the seriousness of

this incident, however, Professor Pamela Milne of the University of Windsor circulated a letter to scholars in the Society of Biblical Literature asking them to write to the President and board of trustees, and many did. The university never acknowledged receiving these letters, publicly or to me. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza used my work for an op-ed piece requested by the *New York Times*, in which she argued that 'to place the agency of Mary, the "single" mother, into the center of our attention interrupts the androcentric Christmas phantasy…a move dangerous in the eyes of both ecclesiastical and political authorities'. This piece, which mentioned my experience in Detroit, that of Chung Hyun-Kyung in Korea, and of Rosemary Radford Ruether who was under attack by right wing, anti-feminist Christian groups, was rejected by the *Times* as too controversial.

Six months after the appearance of the *Free Press* article, the controversy continued. I was awakened one night after midnight by fire engine sirens. I looked outside and could not at first compute what I saw: my car was on fire. Someone had put a rag in the gas tank, lit it and crept away. The arson squad said that had there been less gas in the tank, an explosion would have taken out my garage and that of my neighbor. As it was, only the back end of the car was destroyed and the tires melted. This incident was filed as a hate crime; the crime, the police said, of a coward. At the university, only the Union officially claimed to see any connection, and they helped me pay for the damage.

My understanding of my position in the university was changing. I got a quick glimpse of the abyss of endless, fruitless litigation and unemployment that could open under my feet as it has under the feet of other feminist scholars. I got a glimpse of the fanaticism and power with which patriarchy clings to images it creates of women, and of the uses to which the images are put. That naked face of 'the fathers' is not one I'm ever likely to forget.

Excerpts from my negative mail are valuable as clear expressions of sexist ideology. I'll quote just a few. 'You belong to the group of women who believe they can do with their bodies what they wish. Not so.' 'Only an egomaniac would put themselves in the position of knowing more than the great theologians of the church'. The possibility that Mary was raped is called 'garbage', modernistic rubbish, and the feminist babbling of radical propagandists, 'the infiltration of Satan's influence', sick, 'a terrible dishonor', 'dirty things'. 'Mary could not have conceived by rape, or her child Jesus would have been an imperfect human and would not have been a suitable ransom to make

possible the release from sin and death for us'. 'Have you talked to yourself and other women about having a baby after this kind of abuse? Don't you think this will have an effect on her? God forbids this kind of thinking. Many have tried to pervert the gospel of Jesus Christ including his own people.' 'I cannot stand to think of rape and Mary in the same breath'. 'It is disgusting to think that God would allow *Mary* to be raped'. 'God kept Mary and Jesus pure from the revolting, shameful things you write about'. And my personal favorite: 'You are associating Mary with the lowest of the low, in claiming that she was raped and had an illegitimate child'.

These responses tell us what we already know: that sexism and misogyny are deeply rationalized and theologized; that hatred and blame are directed against the female victims of male violence, and against the throwaway children of such violence; that the official doctrines regarding Mary denigrate normal women; that fundamentalists and the ultra-orthodox see, as liberals often do not, that biblical and traditional images of women go hand in hand with the denial of women's rights to control their own bodies and their lives. Further, these popular outpourings are not so far removed from some scholarly sensibilities, as I tried to show in a recent issue of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

Annette Kolodny writes that because the best of feminist scholarship 'shatters the very foundations of full panoply of powerful cultural conventions—from class arrangements, to gender hierarchy…—resistance to it will be as powerful as the privileges and cultural beliefs being protected'. But '[t]he moment we abandon our research…in that moment antifeminist intellectual harassment will have prevailed'. Four years after this experience of mine began, I can make this assessment. I still have my job, but I feel publicly silenced in many ways at my university. Fewer students take my courses, and some who do take them tell me of being dissuaded by advisors and other faculty. My profile is very low. The letters still trickle in, or come in spurts.

And, I have not written another book. I say that last sentence in shame and frustration. I'm working on one, trying to summon the will and find the time and financial support to finish. But I have not finished one. Much of my scholarly energy has been spent defending myself in articles and talks, going over old ground, asking for real conversation and critique. It is difficult to move on.

Against the assault, my coping methods have been good ones, I think: focusing on solid friendships, children, animals, horseback riding, teaching, and writing of another kind in the Detroit Writers

Guild. I have a book of poetry I am sending out soon to find a publisher, called *Pomegranate Seeds and Other Detroit Poems*. Some of my students are excellent, and energizing. My spirituality is leaner and meaner—sort of hollowed out. And Sheffield Academic Press has published a UK paperback of *Illegitimacy*.

I can now analyze how the sexist structures of society, church, and university interlocked. I know that jokes at parties, ridicule of women faculty and candidates, harassment that went unchallenged, and lack of concern for employment equity were always clear signals that none of us are safe. The nature of the backlash deserves close examination: it is not irrational outbursts, individual acts of cowardice, and lack of leadership, pompous posturing, opportunities for cruelty. Rather, to paraphrase Thomas Sugrue, these are all political acts, carefully calculated to intimidate; hortatory acts, intended to announce boundaries and serve as a warning.

On the positive side, at the University of Detroit Mercy we have strengthened the Women's Studies program, and used it as a base to fight for more feminist faculty, a diverse scholarly community, and revision of hiring, promotion, and tenure policies. We have brought in speakers like bell hooks. There is a new Academic Vice-President and a new Vice-President for Public Relations, a sexual harassment policy with teeth, and now a commission on the status of women. On the broader scale, analyses of anti-feminist intellectual harassment by the Modern Language Association, American Academy of Religion, and Society of Biblical Literature have brought the experiences of many like mine out into the open, showing us that we are not alone, and setting before us the goal of 'changing the sound of the institution's voice', as Kolodny puts it, by creating a context in which individuals can speak from within the institution to both condemn anti-feminist intellectual harassment and pursue feminist research.

I would like to end with an excerpt from a poem I wrote called 'How the Hate Mail Works and Doesn't Work'. The black-haired figure at the end is my friend Anca Vlasopolo, from the English Department at Wayne State University, but she stands for Pam Milne, Gloria Albrecht, Jeff McDowell, Chester Brown, my students, the feminists and pro-feminists of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion, and all the other powerful voices I've mentioned.

How the Hate Mail Works and Doesn't Work

For Salman Rushdie, eight years after the fatwa

You can scrawl it or type it,
on lined paper, with jagged edges, or on embossed, with a watermark.
No return address, or the address of your firm.
You can send a single copy, or xerox it around.

Now when it's received probably it will be opened by the addressee
though a little experience should show it would be less harmful if a third party opened it. You can count on the recipient's curiosity, especially if it's a writer.
These people are not as smart as they think.
Even if the way you word things is not quite grammatical, don't worry, the words will hurt. They are infectious, actually.
How you will feel when you mail it: really good; a good day's work.
Off it goes with all your angers, sailing free.
How the recipient will feel: not so good; might laugh nervously; might flush or feel chilled.
Will sense the words enter brain and lodge there.
Will probably save your letter, to study it. Not so smart.
And then, while you go off to work and play, enjoy the family, discipline your wife or child, worship regularly, eat well,
then the letter really begins to work:
Your words grow deep and wide, and link up with other letters, phrase to phrase, image to image, curse to curse.
Imagine behind you a vast network of letter writers and institutions.
This little letter of yours welcomed seriously in high places, at work in the PR and in the money at those long mahogany tables.
It's at work in shame and joint pain, can't even lift a glass of milk,
in confusion and the loss of friends, in reprimands and jokes, especially jokes, even an occasional act of violence: nothing big, makes your point. Moving on then into paranoia
the weakening of the will to work
repulsion for the work,
cessation of the work. See?
But one thing. Watch out
lest one rise like a ship from the back row of the AAUP seminar

her black hair sizzling
to defend her friend's freedom
and on a wave of furious reason
demolish the positions
of the bloated priest with dandruff
the gesticulating philosophy professor
the white-cuffed monogrammed vice-president for public relations and
the absent president.
Watch out.
the two of them together are utterly invincible.

Postscript

After my diagnosis in 2005, I had two riding accidents: in the first one I was thrown into the wall of the arena, slithered down, and heard myself make a mouse sound: 'Help'. A guy who worked at the stables there did hear me and took Rapp back to his stall and un-tacked him. He gave me a bottle of water which I poured over my head and felt better. My arm was swollen but not broken and the swelling went down. My hips and pelvis were not so good. I eventually limped back to the stall, saw that Rapp was OK, then drove myself home. Word had spread by the time I returned to the stables a few days later, but I said I was 'fine'. Limping, but fine.

The second accident was more serious. By then I had lost a lot of muscular power. I finished up a session with Rapp, took my feet out of the stirrups, was cooling him down when all of a sudden he spooked—at what I will never know. It felt like coming out of the gate at the Kentucky Derby. I calmly said to myself, 'Sit up, sit up'. I tried to circle him; tried every trick I knew. At a full gallop he rounded the arena twice or three times (or only once). Everything I tried seemed to encourage him to go faster and it passed through my mind that this might be it. When he did start to circle I no longer had any leg or thigh; I saw myself slipping to the right, towards the wall and that's the last thing I remembered.

Justine, who came to feed the horses, found me curled up on a bench and Rapp looking out the arena door. She got me to sit up and I promptly threw up my lunch of tomato soup and cheese sandwich. I apologized. 'Jane, this is a barn—we can handle this.' She put Rapp in his stall. I had, unknown to me, carefully taken off his bridle, and my helmet, put them away, and put on his halter. Post-traumatic amnesia, they said later. Sue and Larry and I think Mike and Becky came. The ambulance arrived, someone secured my head, lifted me onto a board, and off we went to Hotel Dieu. Someone yelled at me, 'Are you terminal?' I said, 'We all are'.

Swing Low

After hours bent over Merkabah and Hekhalot texts
and rabbinic and biblical materials
over the apocrypha and various translations
I expect / I would like / I hope for / dream of

a death with the horses of fire coming
the chariots of fire
over Detroit or wherever it happens
highway, hospice, sidewalk, classroom, my own bed at home

me lifted up
light as an old child
my thin nightgown, my bones,
my flesh and hair on fire

great iron hooves pounding on the air and clouds
Rappahannock if he precedes me come back from the dead, one of them
his soft eyes, his chest muscles bulging
mane and tail ablaze

burning not burnt
reins of light or no reins
joyful recognition of horse, rider, driver if there is one
burning but not burnt

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