



The MYSTERY
of Magdalene

DONATELLO
Mary Magdalen

Ask Tom O'Brien how he feels when a talented athlete won't study, won't go to class, won't work with a tutor, won't *listen*, and he surprises

you. "It's like you've lost a soul," O'Brien says, softly. "It's like one of your children has gone astray."

strapped to a chair and forced to watch an endless loop of football tapes—in the company of coaches. For the next hour, O'Brien and his assistants view footage of the morning practice on a screen at one end of the room. Jagodzinski, who wields the remote control, freezes the action on the screen every two or three steps and rewinds. He does this again and again, as many as a half dozen times, before moving on to the next two or three steps. To the coaches, the freezing and rewinding provide clues to problems with the team's execution. To the casual fan, it's the visual equivalent of a broken record.

O'Brien kicks off his sandals, leans back in his chair and props his bare feet on the table. There are long stretches of silence, punctuated by occasional commentary, mostly from O'Brien. "He's a tough sucker, ain't he?" he says of a freshman. "Run, Colombo, run, get the linebacker," he barks at the screen, as though watching a televised game in his living room. A particularly brutal tackle elicits an approving, "How 'bout them apples?"

For any college football program, replenishing the talent pool is essential, and O'Brien is known as a relentless recruiter. While at the University of Virginia, he and his fellow coaches studied sales techniques at the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration—their target market: the best high school football players in the nation. "He's a bulldog," says UVA head coach George Welsh, who, while leading the Navy football team in 1975, gave O'Brien his first coaching post. When Welsh moved on to Virginia, in 1982, O'Brien followed, eventually rising to the role of offensive coordinator. "He'll make the extra telephone call, go the extra mile, to make those kids feel like he really wants them," says Welsh.

The 1998 Eagles football team boasts eight new recruits from the Greater Boston area, a fact O'Brien points to as evidence that BC's reputation is again solid. "If you go in your backyard and sign eight kids, that tells the nation we don't have a problem here," he says.

BC administrators obviously feel the team's morale and discipline problems are part of the past,

too; following O'Brien's debut 4–7 season, they extended his contract to the year 2002. As this season began, most sportswriters noted that O'Brien was still rebuilding the team and predicted that the 1998 Eagles would again struggle to win more than they lose. But O'Brien dismisses talk of "rebuilding."

"I understand what the process has to be, but I hate to lose," he said one afternoon, staring out his office window as workers inside Alumni Stadium added a coat of maroon paint to the barrier around the field. After all, head coaches are held to a very simple standard. It's fine to have strong feelings about building a sense of family and molding honorable young men, but Tom O'Brien knows his efforts will ultimately be judged in the win-loss column, and whether he can return the Eagles to the form that made them a serious bowl contender in the 1980s and early '90s. While aiming for a regular top-five slot may not be realistic, he does intend for Boston College to rest solidly among the nation's top 25 football programs.

"We've talked about all these basically touchy-feely-nice things, but the bottom line is you have to win football games," he says. "That's what I was hired to do."

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BY CULLEN MURPHY

When an irritable Mark Twain visited the town of Magdala, on the Sea of Galilee, in 1867, he found a poor Arab village, “thoroughly ugly, and cramped, squalid, uncomfortable, and filthy—just the style of cities that have adorned the country since Adam’s time, as all writers have labored hard to prove, and have succeeded.” In a tone of feigned bemusement that fails to camouflage arch disdain, Twain claimed to admire the designs formed upon the house walls with camel dung. Today a visitor will find on the site

only vacation bungalows, and nearby a new Israeli farming community, somewhat inland, named Migdal.

Still, it is difficult to pass the road signs for Migdal on Route 90 north out of Tiberias without thinking of the person whose name they conjure: Mary of

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empty tomb, reputed prostitute, presumed rival of the apostle Peter, exemplar both of lust and of the power of repentance—comes readily to mind when feminist biblical scholars consider the fate of Scripture in the hands of men.

One place to begin looking for Mary Magdalene is in a storage room at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, where the earliest extant depiction of her image has been preserved. It is a damaged fresco from the wall of an ancient house-church discovered in 1929 in the ruins of a place known as Dura Europos, a caravan center and fortified city on a bluff above the Euphrates River, amid the desert in what is now Syria. The fresco shows Mary and two other women approaching what is presumably the tomb of Jesus. Each woman

holds a torch in one hand (it is early morning, before dawn) and a bowl of spices for anointing Jesus’ body in the other. Dressed in white, the women emerge from a dark background, their faces illuminated by the torches.

The Dura Europos painting dates back, at the latest, to the first half of the third century A.D. This can be said with certainty, because Dura Europos was destroyed by the Persians in about A.D. 256 and was never reoccupied or rebuilt. That the fresco

Magdala, that is, Mary Magdalene, one of the most prominent followers of Jesus, who either was born in or made her home in Magdala. The Mary Magdalene of legend is one of the most remarkable female phenomena deriving from Scripture, her reputation and symbolism in subsequent ages held up by a rickety scaffolding of interpretation erected upon a meager foundation of text. Her career—follower of Jesus, witness to the Crucifixion and burial of Jesus, first among the disciples to see the

survived as successfully as it did is owed to the fact that the city's rubble filled up many interior spaces and acted in effect as a preservative. The event being depicted is one that is described in all four of the Gospels, at greatest length and detail in the Gospel of John (20:1). "Now on the first day of the week," the account begins, "Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb." Mary was coming with myrrh: There had been no time to prepare the body of Jesus with ointment prior to burial, because the Sabbath was drawing nigh. No description exists in any scriptural texts of the Resurrection itself; the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary and her companions thus becomes the closest that human testimony can approach to the defining moment of Christianity. From the beginning, Christians have been unable or unwilling to forget that Mary Magdalene, a woman, was the first to arrive.

After the figure of Mary the mother of Jesus, there may be no feminine New Testament image more frequently portrayed in Christian iconography than that of Mary Magdalene. The depiction that inhabits my own memory most vividly is the wooden statue by Donatello that today stands in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, in Florence. This is not Mary the witness to the empty tomb but Mary the ravaged slattern, her face pocked with age and hollowed by sin, her hair stringy and gnarled, her torn tunic hanging loosely from a malnourished frame, her hands about to join each other in penitent supplication. It epitomizes the fallen woman redeemed. But just across the River Arno, in the Pitti Palace, hangs a very different Mary, Titian's Mary, full-bodied and sensuous and still capable of physical love, though her red-rimmed eyes are raised to heaven and beseech forgiveness. And then we re-

gard the Mary of Caravaggio, a complex woman, richly dressed, obviously strong, caught at a moment of transition between two lives and seemingly uncertain as to whether she truly wishes to see the error of her ways. Four centuries later, Martin Scorsese gave us, in the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, his version of Nikos Kazantzakis's Mary, the village whore—"proud-gaited, high-rumped Magdalene, her breasts exposed, lips and cheeks covered with makeup." It is for this Magdalene that the crucified Jesus, in a dream, descends from the cross, and it is to this Magdalene that, in the Scorsese film, he makes love. "The thing that fascinated me about Mary Magdalene," the actress Barbara Hershey, who played the role, once explained, "is that she represents all aspects of womanhood: She's a whore and a victim, a complete primal animal, and then she's reborn and becomes virginal and sister-like."

So prominently does Mary Magdalene loom in the popular imagination that it is easy to forget that all the original information about her takes up no more than a few hundred words spread among the four Gospels, recounting only a handful of distinct episodes. In the Gospel of Mark (15:40-41), she appears for the first time in the aftermath of the Crucifixion, with these words: "There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the younger

and of Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and administered to him." Later, in the so-called longer ending of Mark, whose relationship to the rest of the text remains unclear, Jesus after his resurrection is said to appear first to Mary, although her testimony is not at first believed by the other disciples. In the Gospel of Matthew (27:55-56), Mary Magdalene is likewise present at the Crucifixion. Upon arriving at Jesus'

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tomb to anoint his body after the Sabbath, she finds the tomb empty. The empty-tomb tradition is also related in the Gospels of Luke and John; in John, Mary actually encounters the risen Jesus, whom she mistakes for a gardener. Because Mary reported the empty tomb to the disciples, she became known among some early Christian writers as *apostola apostolorum* ("apostle of the apostles"). This is the ancient Mary celebrated on the wall of the house-church at Dura Europos. Apart from her presence at the Crucifixion and at the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the Gospels in only one other passage, Luke 8:1–3, the important moment when she is introduced: "The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means."

These fragments represent everything that is indisputably revealed in the Gospels about Mary. It is not said or even intimated that Mary Magdalene is a sexual libertine or a carnal entrepreneur. How and when did this connection come about? As the New Testament scholar Jane Schaberg has put the question: How did Mary Magdalene become a whore?

The origins of her sin

There are several ways to respond. One narrow answer begins with the Gospels themselves. A broader response may involve issues of prophecy and leadership in the early church. It is not always easy when attempting to disentangle popular folkways and an official worldview to establish which serves as the vine and which as the trellis. But Mary Magdalene, as specifically articulated by name in a limited number of important Gospel references, became conflated over the years with other Gospel figures of doubtful reputation.

Some of the most memorable imagery involving Mary Magdalene in the Gospels relates to her as a person who goes to anoint the body of Jesus after his death. But Mary Magdalene is not the only woman associated with the act of anointing. In Matthew 26:6–13 and in Mark 14:3–9, Jesus, not many days before his arrest and crucifixion, is given

dinner at the home of Simon the Leper, where an unnamed woman comes to him with an alabaster jar and, causing scandal by using an expensive perfume that might have cost a typical laborer a year's wages, proceeds to anoint his feet and then dries his feet with her hair. The disciples object strenuously to this extravagance, but Jesus quiets them and explains that the anointing is in advance of and in preparation for his own burial. Not coincidentally, anointing is also biblical imagery associated with the designation of an Israelite king. That thematic echo, linking this unnamed woman's activities and Mary Magdalene's later role, is reinforced by John's version of the same story (12:1–3). Here the dinner is said to take place at the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, and the woman with the ointment is in fact given the name Mary. Although this Mary, as clearly stated, is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and not Mary of Magdala, evidence from Christian writings suggests that a blurring of Mary Magdalene and the woman who anoints the feet of Jesus began at a very early date.

The association of Mary Magdalene and the act of anointing leads to an even more provocative passage. In Luke 7:36–50, Jesus is dining at the home of a Pharisee—that is, a Jew who would tend to take the demands of purity and the rituals of religious observance very seriously—and, as in other accounts, a woman anoints his feet and kisses them and dries them with her hair. This woman, once again unnamed, is now identified as being from "the city" and "a sinner," and Jesus in the end forgives the woman her sins, saying that "your faith has saved you." Nowhere is the nature of her sin specified, although a sexual aspect is unmistakably suggested. Jesus' willingness to accept the woman's ministrations, when he should have known (the Pharisee thinks to himself) "what kind of woman this is who is touching him," is meant to signal his defilement, at least in the opinion of those Pharisees present.

And, of course, it is explicitly stated that Mary Magdalene is a woman of some means—she is one of the three women who "provided for [Jesus and the disciples] out of their means"—and that she has had seven demons cast out of her. The origin of those resources and the nature of those demons have always been a source of suggestive speculation, no less now than in the past. Jane Schaberg, who teaches at the University of Detroit–Mercy and is one of the scholars who has traced the conflated persona of Mary Magdalene, recalls once giving

a paper on her and listening afterward to a professor at the meeting comment that the woman-of-means passage points strongly toward Mary's career on the streets, because "How else could a woman be wealthy?"

To the equation "Mary Magdalene equals woman with ointment equals prostitute" can be added two more elements: the story in John 8:1-11 of the unnamed woman caught in the act of adultery (whose life Jesus saves with the words, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"), and the story in John 4:8-29 of the unnamed Samaritan woman who is living with a man not her husband (and who spreads a report among Samaritans of her encounter with Jesus, after proclaiming, "I know that the Messiah is coming"). It is also perhaps not irrelevant that Magdala, Mary Magdalene's town, though not in Samaria, was associated in some quarters with licentious behavior.

The link connecting all these elements, establishing that from then on there would in effect be three or more persons in one Mary, was finally forged by no less an authority than the pope. A modern visitor to the great Basilica of San Clemente in Rome first enters not the imperial-era basilica but the magnificent medieval structure erected after the Norman sack of Rome in A.D. 1084. Several other levels deep beneath this church preserve, among other things, an ancient shrine to the Mithras cult and the remains of the homes of some wealthy Romans from the first century A.D., including the home of the family of Clement, the third pope, which was turned into a house-church after Clement's martyrdom. Directly below the present basilica lies the vast expanse of the original one, built in the late fourth century and rediscovered in the 19th. This structure is the oldest Christian basilica that still exists in Rome in fully recognizable fashion. Here, in September of 591, Pope Gregory the Great—formerly the monk known as Hildebrand, and the man who sent Augustine of Canterbury to Britain—delivered himself of an opinion on the matter of Mary Magdalene that has resonated down the ages. "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary," Gregory said in his homily, "we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected, according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? . . . It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.

What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. . . . She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt."

The gospel according to Mary

The typology of Mary Magdalene that was given official sanction by Pope Gregory the Great has dominated the Western tradition, in art and commentary, ever since. (For the record, and for what it is worth, the Roman Catholic Church in 1969 officially overruled Gregory's declaration.) But a very different conception of Mary Magdalene once flourished, a conception that seems to have been suppressed. Relics of its memory reappeared by accident beginning about a century ago, in Egypt.

The first relic was a codex, a manuscript bound into book form, that materialized more or less out of nowhere and was suddenly offered for sale in Cairo in 1896. Nothing about the provenance of this codex is known. It was bought by the German scholar Carl Schmidt and removed to Berlin, where it acquired the Latin name of the German capital and became known as the Papyrus Berolinensis 8502. The Berlin codex, it was eventually learned, contained what was left of a text in Coptic called the Gospel of Mary, the Mary of the title being Mary Magdalene. Two other small pieces of the gospel, in Greek, turned up elsewhere in the ensuing years. Internal evidence of various kinds suggests that the Gospel of Mary may date from as early as the first half of the second century, only a generation or two away from when the canonical Gospels took final form. The Gospel of Mary is not itself a historical text—it does not describe real events, and does not purport to—but it is evidence of a debate among and within early Christian communities on the issue of whether women could lead such communities or whether such behavior was tantamount to heresy.

The Gospel of Mary did not at first receive much attention. Schmidt died, and the onset of two world wars brought scholarly activity in Europe to a halt. There was also a small flood caused by burst water pipes, which destroyed the first edition. Then,

just as World War II was coming to an end, an earthenware jar was accidentally discovered in Egypt, which provided much of the necessary context in which the Gospel of Mary needed to be seen.

We can never know why 12 ancient codices and a fragment of a 13th came to rest where they were found. A rugged curtain of cliffs rises above the valley of the Nile River near a village called Nag Hammadi. The time was the late fourth or early fifth century. For whatever reason, someone, perhaps a monk from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, took steps to preserve some 52 holy books, Coptic translations of works that had originally been written in Greek, works of the kind that had been denounced as heretical by the fourth-century theologian Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria. The words of the prophet Jeremiah (32:14-15) may have played through the mind of the person hiding the codices—"Put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last for a long time"—for it was in such a jar, hidden in a cavity under a rock at the base of the cliffs, that the papyrus manuscripts were eventually discovered.

These texts have come to be called the Nag Hammadi library. By the early 1950s, after feuds and transactions of considerable complexity, including at least one murder, almost all of the Nag Hammadi collection rested in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, which for a time proved selective about whom it would allow to study the documents; two complete photographic copies were eventually made available to scholars outside Egypt. It was clear, however, that the codices, which contained 40 previously unknown works, would offer unprecedented access to the world of the Gnostics, a diverse group of Christian communities, active as early as a century after the

time of Jesus, that diverged sharply from the emerging Christian orthodoxy in many ways, especially with regard to the prominence of women both in theology and in community life.

Powerful feminine imagery and ideology suffuse many Gnostic texts. Some describe God as a dyad, embodying both masculine and feminine aspects. The feminine is invoked explicitly in prayers: "May She who is before all things, the incomprehensible and indescribable Grace, fill you within, and increase in you her own knowledge."

The elevation of female motifs and status, at least in the written word, found parallels in Gnostic practice, which often permitted women to hold priestly office. Gnostic thought could be disorderly and fantastical and for a variety of reasons was spurned by Christian polemicists (although some elements seem to find anticipation in the Gospel of John). But the Nag Hammadi documents preserve some early Christian traditions and reflect currents important to an understanding of Christianity's unruly beginnings. Starting in the early 1960s, when facsimiles of these texts began to become avail-

able, a team of scholars working under the general direction of Claremont College's James M. Robinson began translating them into English and exploring the world from which they emerged. The analysis of the documents has served as a training school for two generations of New Testament scholars, including Elaine Pagels, whose 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels* became an unexpected best-seller. The Nag Hammadi field is by and large a friendly, interconnected group, free of the rancor and jealousies that have for decades bedeviled the Dead Sea Scrolls community. One prominent figure in this field is Karen L. King.

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NIMTALLAH/ART RESOURCE, NY

TITIAN
The Magdalene

Mary the prophet

For more than a decade, King's chief scholarly focus has been on the figure of *Mary Magdalene*—not the *Mary Magdalene* of history, about whom there is almost nothing that anyone can say beyond what has been summarized above, but the *Mary Magdalene* who seems to have flourished in the popular Christian imagination from the very earliest days after the death of Jesus. In particular, King's attention has been drawn to the *Gospel of Mary*, in whose narrative the status of *Mary Magdalene*, sharply contrasted with that of Peter, suggests deep divisions within Christian communities over the proper leadership role of women.

At the beginning of a long conversation one morning in her office at Occidental College, where King taught before coming to Harvard Divinity School this year, she made a point that others take pains to make: how fissured an enterprise Christianity was in its first few centuries. As anyone who has been involved in contemporary Christian churches cannot help but be aware, King said, many of the faithful, and even some scholars, hold a romantic view of early Christianity, believing that into a world of unbelief there came belief, and for a time this belief burned simple and pure, and the teachings and rituals passed on by Jesus to his disciples were passed on in this simple and pure form to others. They believe further that over time the pure teachings and rituals became in places corrupted, in a variety of different ways. To these corruptions was given the name heresy. Today in the established Christian churches, in which doctrine and liturgy have obviously evolved to a point beyond anything Peter and Paul might have dreamed of, many yearn wistfully for the supposedly unadulterated Christianity that existed in the first and second centuries A.D.

In fact, as almost any New Testament scholar will patiently explain, the world of early Christianity was fragmented. Considering the circumstantial environment—the Roman Empire, with its extraordinary mixture of peoples and languages, of philosophies and religions—how could it not have been? “Christianity,” said King, “did not fall from heaven as a perfectly pure and already complete done deal.” There were traditions within early Christianity that the evolution of a stronger, more institutionalized tradition in time largely effaced. Acknowledging this fact has implications for our

own epoch and for people who have felt excluded or even oppressed by the dominant tradition. It has implications in particular for women.

The *Gospel of Mary* offers a window onto a segment of this world. The portion that has managed to survive is relatively short, and as is often the case with texts of this kind, the task of reconstruction and translation involves picking your way across numerous lacunae. The result sometimes seems strangely like a wiretap transcript, with all its garbled and inaudible and tentative reconstructions. Here's one passage:

Then he continued. He said, “This is why you get si[c]k and die: because [you love] what de[c]ei[ve]s [you]. [Anyone who] thinks should consider [these matters]: “[Ma]tter gav[e bi]rth to a passion which has no Image because it derives from what is contrary to nature.” The Savior answered and said, “A person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. Rather the mind, which exists between these two, sees the vision an[d] that is w[hat] (pp.11–14 missing)

Parts of such a reconstruction will not become certain until a scholar can do what is called a final collation, which means comparing all the work thus far—that is, the translation, which has been based on an analysis of a text, which has in turn been based on a transcription, which itself has been derived from photographs—with the manuscript originals. In the case of the *Gospel of Mary*, the manuscript in Berlin is supplemented by fragments in Oxford and Manchester, England. (King has examined them all.) The Nag Hammadi manuscripts, as noted, are preserved at the Coptic Museum in Cairo. Long ago separated from one another, each of the hundreds of delicate leaves is today pressed between sheets of hard, clear plastic, like an anatomical specimen or a tissue section, the surfaces still betraying evidence of the papyrus fronds used in the manufacture. Sometimes, only by looking at the originals can a scholar tell whether a certain darkening of the papyrus was really ink from a word or letter fragment, as a photograph might suggest, or just plain discoloration, an uncommunicative age spot. By looking at the originals a scholar can more easily tell if a truncated stroke seemed about to turn one way or another.

It is possible to go even further. While working on her dissertation on the Nag Hammadi text called *Allogenes*, Karen King spent weeks at the Coptic Museum with her fragments of manuscript, bathing parts of it in ultraviolet light to bring out bits and

pieces of normally invisible ink, asking herself questions like "Is this letter absolutely clear? Could it actually be one of two or three letters? Have I deluded myself into believing that it has to be a certain letter on the basis of suppositions I've made?"

The first scene in the Gospel of Mary occurs after the Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, referred to throughout not by name but as "the Savior," is speaking with his disciples, among whose number is Mary Magdalene. The subject of the discourse, which takes the form of something like a Socratic exchange, is the nature of sin and the path toward salvation. Jesus then departs.

In the second scene the male disciples are extremely upset, but Mary steps in to comfort them and turns their attention to discussing the words that the Savior has left them. Peter asks her to offer some guidance, and she goes on to recount a revelation that has been imparted to her privately in the form of a vision of Jesus. Mary's words are well spoken and confidently expressed. But when she is done, squabbling breaks out among the disciples, led by Andrew and Peter. Andrew professes disbelief that the Savior could have said what Mary reports he said, and gives as the reason for his doubt that the reported teachings strike him as strange. Peter's objections take a blunter, more blustery form; he is skeptical, to put it mildly, that the Savior would have conveyed revelation through a woman when so many men were available: "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge [and] not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" After this outburst a disciple named Levi reproves Peter ("You have always been hot-tempered") and counsels the other disciples to heed Mary's revelation. Levi is given the last word. Thereupon the disciples "go forth [to] proclaim and to preach."

The Gospel of Mary is intriguing on a number

of levels. One is simply its theological content, in which the cross and the Resurrection are submergéd, far from central, the emphasis resting instead on Jesus' teachings as the crucial matter for eternal life. It rejects the whole Christian theology of sin, atonement and judgment in favor of a process of internal spiritual development based on Jesus' teachings. The Gospel provides dramatic context and narrative tension in the confrontation

between Peter and Mary Magdalene. This confrontation is deeply rooted, and makes itself apparent in what does and does not appear in various New Testament texts. Although all four Gospels describe Mary Magdalene as being among the first at the empty tomb and two of them describe her as the first person to whom a resurrected Jesus makes himself known, she is not mentioned by Paul as being one of those to whom Jesus ever appeared after the Resurrection. (Paul's list begins with Peter and then proceeds to include "the twelve," and then "more than five hundred brethren at one time," and ends with "last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me.") Indeed, Paul doesn't refer to Mary Magdalene at all. Some ancient versions of the Gospel of Mark add material at the end in which Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene is described. Meanwhile, some ancient versions of the Gospel of Luke add a disputed verse (Luke 24:12) that gives Peter a role at the empty tomb: "But

Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home wondering at what had happened."

Because of his presumptive founding role in the establishment of Christianity, the figure of Peter is often used by early Christian writers, as King observes, to "authorize theological positions." But she also points out that a more complicated image of Peter emerges even in the canonical Gospels. More

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than any of the other disciples, it is Peter who misunderstands, who bumbles, who plays the oaf, who acts out of anger, who evinces all-too-human frailties. It is Peter whose trust in Jesus fails when, after Jesus has bid him to come and walk toward him on the water, he begins to sink (Matthew 14:28–31): “O man of little faith,” Jesus says to Peter as he catches hold of him. “Why did you doubt?” When Jesus is arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, it is Peter who impulsively and unhelpfully draws his sword and slices off the ear of the high priest’s slave (John 18:10). Despite having promoted himself as the most unfailingly loyal of the disciples (Mark 14:29–31), it is Peter who, when the climactic moment comes, publicly disavows any connection with Jesus on three separate occasions. After the Resurrection, Peter cannot bring himself to believe the truth of what Mary Magdalene, a woman, reports to him, even though he later comes to accept that it is true. As often as not, it is Peter who does not quite understand the meaning of whatever happens to be going on. These qualities are not altogether unappealing, and remain warm to the touch over the centuries, long after most accounts of unblemished virtue have grown cold.

The portrayal of Peter as somewhat intemperate and dim is richly elaborated on in noncanonical writings from early Christian times. Not only in the Gospel of Mary but also in the Gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Thomas and Pistis Sophia, Peter finds himself taking the losing side of an argument, and in each case losing to Mary Magdalene. In Pistis Sophia, Mary acknowledges her fear of Peter—“for he threatens me and he hates our race.” Jesus goes so far as to validate Mary and her teachings with the observation that Mary’s heart “is more directed toward the kingdom of

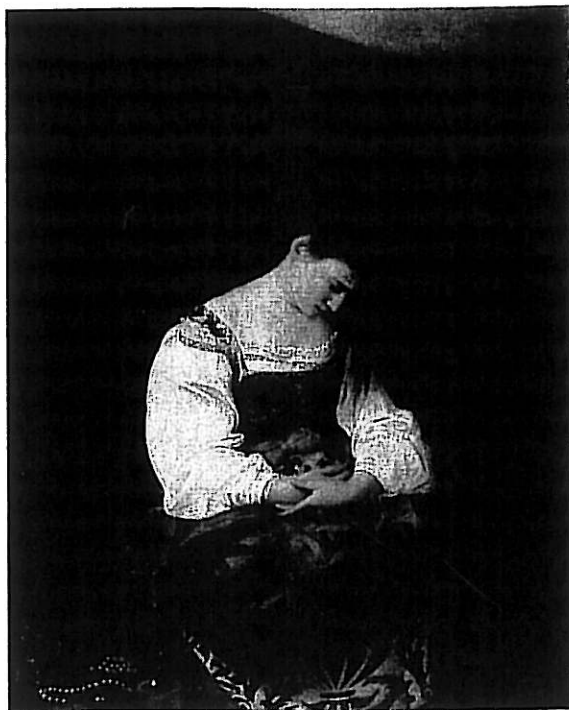
heaven than all thy brothers.” The issue in the disputes between Peter and Mary always involves whether it is legitimate for a woman to prophesy and to preach.

“Peter is almost always the one who turns out to be wrong,” King explains. “He is portrayed, in the Gospel of Mark in particular, as the disciple who doesn’t get it. The other disciples don’t get it either, but it is to Peter that Jesus says, ‘Get behind me, Satan.’ And Peter is the one singled out to

deny Jesus three times. And yet in the canonical tradition, Peter is also the rock on which the Church was built. So there’s an ambiguous portrait of him in the tradition. These Gnostic texts build on that portrait when they pit him in conflict with Mary Magdalene. The disputes between Mary and Peter seem to reflect issues that were being debated, especially in the second and third centuries of the Christian era. What are those issues? Who Jesus is and what his teachings mean for people. Who should have legitimate authority and leadership power. In the Gospel

of Mary, those issues center almost always on male-female interactions. In Peter’s eyes, Mary speaks too much, asks too many questions. But in the end, she is the one who is right.”

There was, King observes, a long history, not only in Christianity but in other ancient religious traditions, of women assuming the role of prophet and of being popularly accepted as legitimate in that role. At the same time, there was also a long history of resistance in many quarters to women in a prophetic role and a tendency to besmirch the reputation of women who claimed the status of prophet by questioning their virtue. The relationship between prophecy and sexuality was sometimes seen with startling literalness. One scholar has pointed out that according to early Greek writ-



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Maddalena pentita

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ings, women were deemed more susceptible to possession because their bodies had an additional orifice, making the entry of spirits that much easier. There was a strong correlation, King has noted, between the esteem in which a woman's prophecy was held and attendant proclamations of her virtue; conversely, to set about sullyng a woman's sexual reputation was a standard method of undermining her legitimacy as a prophet. Thus, the early church commentator Tertullian writes of the prophet Philumene, with whom he violently disagrees, that she "became an enormous prostitute." Virtue, of course, is to a considerable extent a social construct, and this is especially the case with sexual virtue. If the boundaries become confining, if the social territory they encompass is pervasive, then the scope for prophecy or other forms of religious leadership will be correspondingly constricted.

"In the case of women's prophecy," King has written, "the weight of judgment about moral character fell back upon judging their conformity to established gender roles: that meant women fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, and keeping silence in church assemblies." We can see the evolution of what King calls a double bind: Only a woman of conventional habit, outlook and circumstances would be accorded the legitimacy demanded of a prophet, but such a woman by definition would shun such a public role. It was, so to speak, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Such a self-fulfilling prophecy was not a mere abstraction. The kind of leadership displayed by the Mary Magdalene figure in texts like the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Thomas found real-life analogues in the activities of women in communities like those of the Montanists, the Marcionites, the Valentinians and the Carpocratians—communities that were denounced by authorities wielding various degrees of power. As King writes, "Every prominent stream of theology and practice within early Christianity that supported women's leadership was sharply opposed, even decried as heretical."

Mary's incarnations

Whatever the sources of its various strands, whatever the social and religious environment that braided them together, the legend of Mary Magdalene as it has come down to us—Mary as the holy

harlot—was fully formed by the early Middle Ages. A 10th-century sermon by the abbot Odo of Cluny encapsulates most of its essentials: after an existence devoted to "sensual pleasures," Mary helps, by means of a reformed life and zealous ministrations to the daily needs of Jesus, to rescue (somewhat) the female sex from the obloquy into which Eve had supposedly cast it. She becomes a "Venus in sackcloth," as one writer observes. Variations on this theme, and variations upon the variations, unfolded for a thousand years. The legends include those in which Mary lives out her days in the South of France and those in which she is seen as having become, literally, the bride of Christ. The fundamental ambivalence toward her is well captured by the contemporary secular writer Marina Warner, in her book *Alone of All Her Sex*: "The Magdalene, like Eve, was brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity, which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh. For this reason, she became a prominent and beloved saint."

Mary Magdalene's rendered image is widely familiar in its various genres, but one depiction stands out for the association it makes with another biblical figure whose dramatic role is likewise essential, whose reputation has likewise suffered, and whose name is likewise, in essence, Mary—the figure of Miriam, the sister of Moses. By hiding Moses in the bulrushes, Miriam effectively ensures his rebirth, enabling him one day to lead his people into the Promised Land, and yet Miriam herself, after challenging the leadership of Moses, is cruelly ravaged by disease and becomes a symbol of penitence.

The parallels with Mary Magdalene—a witness to the rebirth of Jesus in the Resurrection, and one who may have challenged the leadership of Peter—were plainly apparent to those who created the Mary Magdalene chapel in the Sanctuary of St. Francis at Assisi. There in the chapel, Mary and Miriam—the Miriam who led the victory song, a tambourine in one hand—are enshrined together, witnesses to a parallel twist of fate.

Cullen Murphy is managing editor of "The Atlantic Monthly." This article is excerpted from his just-published book "The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own." Copyright © 1998 by Cullen Murphy. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Reprinted by permission. "The Word According to Eve" will be published in the United Kingdom by Penguin under the Allen imprint.