THE WORD ACCORDING TO EVE

WOMEN
AND THE BIBLE
IN ANCIENT TIMES
AND OUR
OWN

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A PETER DAVISON BOOK
Houghton Mifflin Company
Boston New York
1998

Chapter Ten

VENUS IN SACKCLOTH

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni" (which means Teacher).
— John 20:15–16

Are we to turn about and all listen to her?
Did he prefer her to us?
— Gospel of Mary

ONE OF THE ROUTES that Jesus would have taken when he traveled from his home town of Nazareth to his adopted city of Capernaum, as described in Matthew 4:12–14, led north toward the village of Cana and then eastward across the plain of Azotis and through the Valley of the Doves toward the Sea of Galilee. At the Sea of Galilee, the overland route from the west met the great Via Maris, the ancient highway that linked the civilization of Egypt with that of Mesopotamia. For a stretch the Via Maris followed the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and its path defines the modern highway.

At the intersection of the overland route and the Via Maris, under the rugged face of Mount Arbel, there once lay a fishing town called Magdala. In Aramaic the word *magdala* means "tower," and the remains of a tower can be seen near the waterfront at Magdala today. The Greek name for the town was Tarichaea, which means "dried fish." Magdala was long a fishing center, and even now you can see fishermen in their lighted boats, plying the sea at night in search of sardines and of a catch known locally as Saint Peter's fish. The name is derived, some argue,

from a story (Matthew 17:24–27) in which Jesus advises Peter on how to find the means to pay the Temple tax: "Go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel; take that and give it to them for me and yourself."[1]

Of course, the name may also have been associated with the Galilean fish simply because Peter was a fisherman in Galilee. Not far from Magdala, during the severe drought of 1986, a two-thousand-year-old fishing boat was discovered in the mud when the waters of the Sea of Galilee dramatically receded. It is today on display at Kibbutz Ginosar.[2] The boat is typical of the kind that the apostles Peter, James, and John would have used as they fished the lake. All it seems to need, you may think while contemplating the boat, is a sign saying "Zebedee & Sons."

Or perhaps the true story of the boat is a darker one. The only "naval battle" fought during the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans occurred off the shores of Magdala in A.D. 67, when a small Roman flotilla under the commander Titus (the same Titus who destroyed Jerusalem a few years later) pursued and destroyed a ragtag and miserably equipped assemblage of boats occupied by fleeing rebels who had no safe place to land on shore. There were no survivors. "And a terrible stink, and a very sad sight there was on the following days over that country," the chronicler Josephus wrote, "for as for the shores, they were full of shipwrecks, and of dead bodies all swelled . . . This was the upshot of the sea-fight."[3] Of the inhabitants of Magdala who were not killed, most were sent as slaves to help dig the emperor Nero's abortive canal across the Isthmus of Corinth. The synagogue was turned into a fishpond.

When an irritable Mark Twain visited Magdala 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."[4] 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.

And yet you cannot pass, or at least I could not pass, the road signs for

Migdal on Route 90 north out of Tiberias without thinking of the person whose name they conjure: Mary of 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 more 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 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, 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 of 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. They are depicted, in other words, as "myrrophores," bearers of myrrh, an exotic spice that could be mixed with oil. Myrrophore is one of those wonderful occupational categories that seem to exist only in scholarly recapitulations of the biblical world. In the Yale fresco, Mary and the other myrrophores, dressed in white, emerge from a dark background, their faces illuminated by the torches.[5]

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 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 regard 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."[6] 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."[7]

So prominently does Mary Magdalene loom in the popular imagina-

tion 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 a matter of some doubt, 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' 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. 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?

There are several ways to respond. One narrow answer begins with the Gospels themselves. As noted, conceivably the first fixed image of Mary Magdalene in the Christian imagination is as the original witness, if not

to the Resurrection of Jesus itself, then to the core circumstances, whatever they were, in which the Resurrection stories are embedded. In the Gospel of Matthew, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" come upon an angel at the tomb, who tells them that Jesus "has risen." In the shorter ending of Mark the events described are similar, with "a young man, in . . . a white robe" revealing the news to Mary Magdalene, to Mary the mother of James, and to Salome, who have come to the tomb to anoint the body; in the longer ending, the women take the news to the other disciples and at first are repeatedly disbelieved. In Luke, it is likewise Mary Magdalene and a group of other women who divulge their experience at the tomb to the male disciples, and again their story is dismissed. The same progression from female witness through female testimony to male responsorial doubt occurs in the Gospel of John; the apostle Peter, though, runs to the tomb to see for himself and, having achieved what Augustine would later call "ocular proof," deigns finally to accept what the women have told him: "Then Simon Peter came . . . and he went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but lying rolled up in a place by itself" (John 20:6–7). John adds the telling detail that when Jesus makes himself known once again in person, it is not to Peter but to Mary.

Mary Magdalene is the common element in all the Gospel accounts of the events surrounding the Resurrection. 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. Another early view of Mary is as the symbolic New Eve, for whereas the disobedience of the original Eve in the Garden of Eden, as some commentators would have it, brought about the fall, so Mary's recognition of the "gardener" as the resurrected Jesus marks the advent of redemption. The role of New Eve, however, came with an accretion of certain additional elements, for the very idea of Eve in some minds summoned up the notion of sin, and in some minds the very idea of redemption summoned up the notion of repentance.

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.[8]

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 (rather, "Simon, a man who had leprosy," as the *Inclusive Language Lectionary* prefers it), 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 resources" — 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 recalls once giving a paper on the subject of Mary Magdalene 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?*"[9]

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.[10]

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 nineteenth. This structure is the oldest Christian basilica that still exists in Rome in fully recognizable fashion.[11] 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."[12]

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 this 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.[13] 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 twelve ancient codices and a fragment of a thirteenth 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 fifty-two 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.[14]

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 hands of 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 forty 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 both in theology and in community life of women.

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."[15]

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 available, a team of scholars working under the general direction of 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. 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.

A visitor to the campus of Occidental College in northern Los Angeles cannot help but notice several things. One is the demographic complexion of the student body: fully half of the undergraduates are black, Hispanic, or Asian, a proportion that roughly mirrors the makeup of the surrounding community, whose composition Occidental set out some years ago to reflect more accurately. A second thing is the trailers with portable dressing rooms and the trucks with lights and cameras and

recording equipment. Occidental has doubled as the set for the fictional California University on the television show *Beverly Hills 90210*. The stone plinth at the main entrance that bears the name Occidental College is from time to time covered with a false front made of plywood, which proclaims its secondary identity.

I ventured out to Occidental in order to see Karen King, who not long afterward was named to a full professorship at Harvard Divinity School. King is one of a handful of women who have made Mary Magdalene an important subject of academic inquiry. Her religious interests are not exclusively antiquarian, however. She has been active in a liberal Episcopal church in Pasadena. At Occidental she taught a popular survey course on the diversity of traditional religions and new spiritual movements in the Los Angeles area, an activity that continually pointed up the way social realities can shape religious meaning and practice.

Like a number of other women and men of her generation in New Testament studies, King received much of her training through intensive work on Gnostic materials, not only those found in the Nag Hammadi library but also the *Gospel of Mary*. She ordinarily writes an easy prose of considerably less than Teutonic density, but in reading one paper she wrote about Mary Magdalene, I came across a passage whose evidence of supporting documentation, in the form of a tight corset of citational supranumerology, brought home what painstaking work — what careful blending of past surmise and ongoing inference — can lie behind even what seems like a straightforward statement of fact:

> In looking at Christianity in the first two to three centuries, it appears that in many, although not in all cases,[28] women's authority was based on prophetic experience. The Corinthian women prophets,[29] Philip's daughters,[30] Ammia of Philadelphia,[31] Philumene,[32] the visionary martyr Perpetua,[33] and several leaders in the Montanist movement (Maximilla, Priscilla or Prisca, Quintilla, and three other women who are identified as prophets in Montanist inscriptions)[34] — all these women were prophets and exercised authority in various ways.[16]

I once attended a session at the annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research, an organization devoted to archaeology in the Middle East, at which an epigrapher read a paper on certain is-

sues involving inscription fragments from ancient Palestine. When the author was finished, a ponytailed respondent with no experience of the demands of epigraphy arose to deliver a formal response, criticizing the author's paper for, among other things, what he deemed to be an excessive use of footnotes. The footnotes, he said, were "porcupine quills meant to protect an underdeveloped epistemology." Jaws dropped. A collective inhalation drew doors and windows tight. The ponytailed respondent came from outside the discipline, and his criticism was widely viewed as outrageous. In reconstructing texts and inscriptions from the ancient world, an immense amount of scholarly apparatus, reflecting a prior working-over of the same patch of ground, may be required to support what otherwise seems to be an innocuous phrase or sentence. (To give an extreme example, the reconstructed *Documenta Q* version of the Lord's Prayer, recently published by the International Q Project, contains a handful of words of original prayer followed by two hundred pages of dense footnotes.)[17]

Karen King grew up in the ranching community of Sheridan, Montana, far away from this world. She was drawn into it more or less by accident — "I stumble into things," she explains — when, as an undergraduate at the University of Montana, she happened to take a class from John D. Turner, a member of the *Nag Hammadi Library in English* project, who passed around copies of tentative translations of various Gnostic texts. The Gnostic materials circulating at the time were typically stamped with the notation "This material is for private study by assigned individuals only. Neither the text nor its translation may be reproduced or published in any form, in whole or in part."[18] This was the scholarly equivalent of "Wet Paint: Do Not Touch." King had grown up with a deep interest in religion and had at various times sampled the various denominations that Sheridan had to offer. She was drawn to the Gnostic texts and intrigued by the outlooks they expressed. After obtaining her bachelor's degree, she undertook graduate work in religious studies at Brown University and at the Free University in West Berlin. At Brown, King was for years the only female graduate student in the religion department. She was the only female graduate student anyone could clearly remember having *ever* been in the department.

While in Berlin in the early 1980s, King participated in the work of the Berlin Koptische-Gnostische Arbeitsgruppe, based at Humboldt University in what was then East Germany. The *arbeitsgruppe* has long been one of the main repositories of Nag Hammadi scholarship (the other being the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont), and East Berlin's Egyptian Museum was also the physical home of the Papyrus Berolinensis. Once a week, at dawn on Fridays, King would cross into East Berlin at the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint, often after being closely searched by East German guards; given that the Gnostic texts themselves probably survived only because they were hidden, the experience was eerily apposite. Once in East Berlin, she would work all day with her colleagues in the *arbeitsgruppe*, most notably the New Testament historian and Egyptologist Hans-Martin Schenke, who generously set aside one day a week for this purpose. She would go back to West Berlin shortly before her visa expired at midnight.

Over the years the various texts of the Nag Hammadi library have been parceled out to scholars for translation and analysis. King began looking at various issues in such Gnostic texts as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Gospel of Thomas*. In 1985, not long after she arrived in Los Angeles, she conceived and organized an international conference on the subject "Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism" and edited the conference papers into a book of the same name — her first major work, now a standard collection in the field. She proudly sent the book to her mentor, Schenke, only to discover that the subject matter held utterly no interest for him. He told King some years later that he had given the book to his wife, thinking that she might have some use for it. As noted, European institutions of learning, German ones in particular, have been far less open to women and feminism than American ones; the tendency there is to see the encounter of feminism and the Bible as a passing ideological whim. Those Americans!

(Karen Torjesen had a nearly identical experience with her German mentor, Ekkehard Muhlenberg. After sending him a copy of *When Women Were Priests*, she received a letter back saying, in effect, as Torjesen paraphrases it, "The cover is beautiful. The acknowledgments are deeply moving. But I'm afraid I cannot bring myself to read it.")

For more than a decade, Karen 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, 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, King 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 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 tentatively reconstructed words and passages:

> 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)[19]

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. (King has examined them all.) The Nag Hammadi manuscripts 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. 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 she or he 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*, 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 submerged, 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 the 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 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."[20] 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 writings, 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 sullying 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."[21] 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."

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 tenth-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 ministration to the daily needs of Jesus, to rescue (somewhat) the female sex from the obloquy into which Eve cast it. She becomes a "Venus in sackcloth," as one writer observes.[22] 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 writer Marina Warner: "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."[23]

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 is cruelly ravaged by disease and becomes a symbol of penitence.

The parallels with Mary Magdalene — witness to the rebirth of Jesus in the Resurrection, enduring penitent for unenumerated misdeeds — 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.

Chapter Eleven

A GLIMPSE THROUGH THE DOOR

And when she had finished her prayer, she turned
and saw a great pit full of water, and said: "Now is the time for
me to wash." And she threw herself in,
saying: "In the name of Jesus Christ
I baptize myself on the last day!"
— Acts of Paul and Thecla 3:34

Avoid the profane tales told by old women.
Rather train yourself toward godliness.
— 1 Timothy 4:7–8

"HELLO, THIS IS Bernadette, in Cambridge." The voice was that of a caller to Christopher Lydon's *The Connection*, a radio program on WBUR in Boston, and the subject of the program was "Sexuality, Clerical Ministry, and Gay Spirituality." I recognized the caller's voice at once — the pitch, the precision, the hint of humor — and admired the way the voice's owner deftly and unobtrusively made reference to her new book, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. I had heard the caller on a number of occasions, across a table or in a lecture hall, and could easily summon to mind a picture of the tall woman with the striking Levantine features who went with the voice. Her commentary continued as I pulled over to the curb to listen: "When we look at why early Christians condemned sexual relations between women, we realize that Paul shared some cultural assumptions about sexuality that are alien to our world and *should* be alien to our world. Paul and others in the Roman world believed that natural relations are relations between a subordinate woman and a man who is over her."[1] Some of what Paul has to say about women, in other words, reflects not any systematic theology but simply the fact that he lived when he did.

1. Mendel Nun, "Cast Your Net Upon the Waters," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Nov.–Dec. 1993): 47–56,70.
2. Shelley Wachsmann, *The Sea of Galilee Boat* (New York: Plenum, 1995).
3. Josephus, *Life and Works*, p. 737.
4. Mark Twain, "Innocents Abroad," in Twain, *Complete Travel Books*, p. 332.
5. Matheson, *Dura Europos*; Goranson, "Battle Over the Holy Day."
6. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Last Temptation of Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 147.
7. Quoted in Schaberg, "Fast Forwarding to Magdalene."
8. The story of this conflation is concisely rendered in Schaberg, "How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore." For a fuller account of this issue and other matters, see Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*.
9. Schaberg, "How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore," p. 34.
10. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 9, s.v. "St. Mary Magdalene."
11. Nolan, *Basilica of S. Clemente*, pp. 1–4, 85–95.
12. Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 96.

13. Karen L. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority: The Case of the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene)," unpublished ms. (a version of this article appears under the same title in Kienzle and Walker, *Heritage of Magdalene)*; Karen L. King, "The Jesus Tradition in the *Gospel of Mary*," unpublished ms.
14. The story of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices is well told by Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels*; see also Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, pp. 1–26.
15. Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, p. 50.
16. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority."
17. Shawn Carruth and Albrecht Garsky, "Q 11:26–4," in Robinson, Hoffmann, and Kloppenborg, *Documenta Q*.
18. Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, p. xxviii.
19. Translation of the *Gospel of Mary*, courtesy of Karen L. King.
20. *Pistis Sophia*, in R. McL. Wilson, *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, vol. 9 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), pp. 325, 52.
21. King, "Prophetic Power and Women's Authority."
22. Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth*, pp. 71–99.
23. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 225.