

Interpreting the Lost *Gospel of Mary*: Feminist Reconstructions and Myth Making

Sarah K. Balstrup

Introduction

The *Gospel of Mary* is one of a series of texts unearthed in the mid-twentieth century that were translated and made available for scholarly interpretation in the late 1970s. These ‘lost gospels’ were first studied as Gnostic texts;¹ however, the Gospels of Mary, Thomas and Judas were of vital interest to those outside of Gnostic Studies, as they appeared to offer new evidence about Jesus, Judas, and Mary Magdalene. The *Gospel of Judas* is known for representing Judas the traitor in a positive light, the *Gospel of Thomas* professes to be written by Jesus’ twin brother, and the *Gospel of Mary* is the only gospel named after a woman. In the early 1980s when feminist theologians began to analyse the *Gospel of Mary* they saw the blurred figure of the ‘real’ Mary Magdalene in the papyrus fragments. According to these scholars, the patriarchal Biblical canon had obscured the truth about Mary and Jesus and these ancient writings were primary evidence of a strong female spiritual leader, standing at Christ’s side. The feminist scholars that will be referred to in this article include Karen L. King, Esther De Boer, Susan Haskins, Jane Schaberg, and Hannele Koivunen, among others. Due to the theological nature of their writing, it is sometimes unclear whether the Mary of the gospel is imagined to be a historical person, a spiritual figure, or a name associated with a religious tradition. Such ambiguities complicate the analysis of primary evidence

Sarah K. Balstrup is a PhD candidate in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney.

¹ Most early translations and interpretations refer to these texts as Gnostic, yet others have used derivations like Christian-Gnostic. Karen L. King and Esther De Boer consider the text to be early Christian, albeit bearing Stoic and Platonic influences. See Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), pp. 155-170 and Esther De Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1997), p. 93.

Gospel of Mary

that is bound up with a commentary on the patriarchal shortcomings of the Christian tradition, both past and present. While the feminist scholars mentioned take liberties with evidence to varying degrees, all have utilised the *Gospel of Mary* as a tool to dispel the myth of the 'penitent' Magdalene (the sinner redeemed by Christ), and to develop a new and empowering myth that women can connect with.

Artifacts and Uncertainties

Until its discovery, nobody suspected that the *Gospel of Mary* existed.² While the texts from the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea finds revealed many documents previously known to scholars through the writings of the early church fathers, the *Gospel of Mary* had no pre-existing polemic surrounding it. The gospel that we have today is comprised of textual information from three separate papyrus documents. The first surfaced in 1896, when it was purchased by Dr Carl Reinhardt at a dealer's market in Cairo. The Berlin Codex (8502), as it is known, contains four gospels. Although this fifth century Coptic codex is significantly damaged, and several pages are missing, it is by far the most complete of the three versions that have been discovered to date. Subsequent finds include the Rylands Papyrus (463), a single papyrus sheet written in Greek on both sides, and the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus (3525), a fragment of a papyrus sheet written in cursive Greek text on one side. These two Greek fragments have been dated to the early third century.

Although Reinhardt obtained the gospel in 1896, its translation was notably delayed.³ Carl Schmidt began work on translating the document; however, as his work was just about to be published, a water main burst and flooded the printing house, destroying all of his work. The interruption of the First and Second World Wars prevented him from publishing anything on the codex, and after he died in 1938 Walter Till took over the project. In 1945, a very significant discovery was made at Nag Hammadi when a peasant found a jar containing fifty-two texts from the fourth century, including a large number of Gnostic and early Christian religious tractates. Although the discovery of *The Gospel of Mary* was exciting in itself, the Nag Hammadi find marked the beginning of a whole new era in

² Karen L. King, 'The Gospel of Mary', in *The Complete Gospels*, ed. Robert J. Miller (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 359.

³ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 75-76.

the study of early Christianity. As such, the *Gospel of Mary* emerged into the midst of larger debates over Christian origins. When Till realised that two of the texts in the Berlin Codex were replicated in the find, he purposefully delayed publication in the hope of a simultaneous release with the Nag Hammadi tractates. The wait, however, proved too long, and he published his translation in 1955. Although H. C. Roberts had already released his translation of the Rylands Papyrus in 1938 (which he had positively identified as a part of the *Gospel of Mary* through conversations with Schmidt),⁴ there was so little of this fragment that study of the text did not begin in earnest until after the 1977 re-issue by Till and Schenke. In 1978 Canadian scholar Anne Pasquier analysed the text in considerable depth, and in 1983 the Oxyrhynchus fragment was published by P. J. Parsons. The facsimile edition of the Nag Hammadi Library was released in 1977; this sparked a series of conferences on Gnosticism and in 1983 the first conference covering the relationship between Gnosticism and early Christianity was held.⁵ In 1985, the role of women in Gnosticism was considered in the conference titled “Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism” held in Claremont, California.⁶

Taking these developments into account, the impact of the *Gospel of Mary* on the study of Christianity really begins after 1977, with a specific focus on the significance of women in the gospel developing in the mid-1980s. While the earliest scholars working on the text focused mainly on accurate preservation and translation, their work may be understood to be based upon a desire to seek evidence about the early Christian period that they could compare with extant accounts from the Biblical canon and the writings of Christian polemicists. The deeper study of these documents revealed the amorphous and syncretic nature of the early Christian tradition and the indefinite nature of the term ‘Gnostic’, a term that no religious

⁴ Christopher Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.

⁵ As a result of that conference, the following book was published: *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity: Fourteen Leading Scholars Discuss the Current Issues in Gnostic Studies*, eds Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson Jr (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986).

⁶ See Marvin Meyer and Esther De Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: The Secret World of Mary Magdalene the Companion of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2004), pp. 74-75.

Gospel of Mary

group used to describe itself.⁷ For these Gnostic scholars, the *Gospel of Mary* was an interesting find, but not necessarily the most significant of the documents discovered.⁸ As Bart D. Ehrman observes, the study of the non-canonical gospels is important for the study of Christianity, as they demonstrated that “Christians continued to reflect on the significance of Jesus and to incorporate their views into the stories told about his words and deeds. This process began at the very outset of Christianity itself, when the earliest believers told others about the man in whom they believed.”⁹ Such theological objectives infuse the study of the ‘lost’ gospels and historical or linguistic theorising is inevitably linked with a desire to determine the ‘truth’ of Jesus’ teachings.

In order to determine the significance of the discovery of the *Gospel of Mary* it is important to assess what was already known about Mary Magdalene from other sources. Up until the non-canonical finds of the mid-twentieth century, the earliest information available came from the canonical texts of the Bible. Polemical writings do not offer much, and although Epiphanius makes reference to *The Questions of Mary* and/or *The Little Questions of Mary*,¹⁰ these writings are lost, and their contents are unknown. As the canonical gospels offer contradictory accounts of events, and due to the frequent appearance of the name “Mary,”¹¹ most debates about Mary Magdalene have attempted to clarify her identity.¹² In 591 CE Pope Gregory the Great declared that what had appeared to be three Marys

⁷ Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. viii-3.

⁸ For example, Bart D. Ehrman asserts that the *Gospel of Thomas* was by far the most important. See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 177.

⁹ Ehrman, *The New Testament*, p. 184.

¹⁰ See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.8.1-3, in Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 3.

¹¹ Reportedly, about a quarter of all Palestinian Jewish women were called Mary during the first century. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (New York: T & T Clark, 2002), p. 298.

¹² There is a long tradition of trying to identify Marys in Biblical Studies. When the mid-twentieth century non-canonical finds surfaced, the list of derivations of “Mary” included: Mariam(m)e, Mariham, Maria, Mary of Magdala, Mary Magdalene, Mariahamme, Mariamme, Mariamne, Maria, and the Magdalene. See Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 126. The three figures that Pope Gregory declared to be one were: Mary Magdalene; Mary of Bethany; and the nameless woman who anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment in Luke 7: 36-50.

in fact referred to one.¹³ This decision to interpret the various Marys in the canon as a single identity, and to associate Mary Magdalene with the unnamed sinful woman of Luke 7:37, eventuated in the characterisation of Mary as ‘penitent.’ The image of the penitent Magdalene that was popular in the Middle Ages depicted a woman in the submissive posture of prayer seeking redemption for her sins. Medievalists have studied the cult of Mary Magdalene extensively and revealed the stages in the development of her legend. For instance, it is well known that the story of Mary Magdalene’s later life as a miracle-working saint and ascetic who evangelised the Pagans of Gaul developed out of hagiographic material during the ninth century.¹⁴ From the Middle Ages to the present, it has been the mythical, and not the canonical, Magdalene that has dominated, and there are a host of examples from art and literature that testify to her continued significance.

Before considering feminist interpretations of the *Gospel of Mary*, it is useful to get a sense of its content. As the first six pages of the gospel are missing, the narrative begins part way through, when an unnamed questioner asks Jesus about the nature of matter.¹⁵ Peter then asks about the nature of sin. Jesus replies that all things will be restored to their root, and that sin is like the nature of adultery, which Christopher Tuckett considers to be a reference to the unnatural combination of spirit and matter typical of Gnostic thought.¹⁶ Jesus departs saying, “the Son of Man is within you,” so do not be lead astray by false teachings. The disciples weep and are very distressed by what Jesus has said. Mary stands, greets them all and comforts them by saying, “Do not weep and do not grieve, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men.” The passage follows that “When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Saviour.” Peter says to Mary “Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you more than the rest of women,” and asks her to tell them the teachings that Jesus had given her privately. Mary then recounts a vision that she had where Jesus spoke to her. Four pages are

¹³ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 32.

¹⁴ Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene*, pp. 36-46.

¹⁵ This summary utilises the George W. MacRae and R. Wilson translation in Douglas M. Parrott (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 453-472.

¹⁶ Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 143.

Gospel of Mary

missing, and the text continues with Mary's vision, as she describes the ascent of the soul and its encounters with various powers that it must contend with. While the majority of available translations use the wording of the Coptic version for the line, "When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Saviour had spoken with her," Lührmann uses the absence of the words "with her" in the Rylands fragment to suggest that Jesus was literally speaking through Mary as a medium.¹⁷ The disciples Andrew and Peter comment disapprovingly on her teaching: Andrew does not believe that Jesus said such things, and Peter objects to the fact that Jesus spoke to a woman in private and seems to prefer her to his male disciples. Mary weeps, and Levi defends her, saying that, "if the Saviour has made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her?" Confirming that Jesus loved her more than them, he tells his brothers to "put on the perfect man" and go out and preach the gospel. The text ends with the words "The Gospel According to Mary" and this is taken to be the title of the work. Although the identity of the Mary in this gospel is most often declared to be Mary Magdalene, scholars like Stephen Shoemaker have highlighted that this is hardly certain, and that the gospel could easily refer to Mary of Nazareth instead.¹⁸

The Power and Limitations of the *Gospel of Mary*

In our contemporary secular academic environment, all forms of religious expression are equally tenable as objects of study. There are countless 'Christianities' and people have continued to "incorporate their views" into the closed Biblical canon through the development of Christian mythology and through alternate exegesis.¹⁹ For feminist theologians who saw their religion as a source of oppressive patriarchal values, the *Gospel of Mary* came to the fore at an opportune time and promised the revision of the feminine within Christianity. In 1977 when the gospel became available for study, second-wave feminists had already made a significant contribution to scholarship, and according to Hannele Koivunen, the study of

¹⁷ Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 124.

¹⁸ Stephen J. Shoemaker, 'A Case of Mistaken Identity? Naming the Gnostic Mary', in *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian*, ed. Stanley Jones (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), p. 30.

¹⁹ Erhman, *The New Testament*, p. 184.

“femaleness in religions” commenced at about this time.²⁰ Women’s liberation sought to highlight and overturn the derogatory associations extant within the Christian tradition between women, sexuality and sin. More than the study of the feminine, the type of approach to which Koivunen refers involved female academics investigating the effective ‘misrepresentation’ of women throughout the history of the major religions. As Christianity provided the most influential symbolic language for Western society, the need to review this language was imperative.²¹ Feminist theologians were intent on refashioning Christianity in line with their views, yet other feminist scholars of religion rejected the patriarchal Christian tradition in favour of the somewhat maligned archetypical Mother Goddess. In this particular study of the scholarship surrounding the *Gospel of Mary*, the majority of female academics who have analysed the text are of the former persuasion. Although the study of the *Gospel of Mary* begins in 1977, monographs written by feminist theologians only begin to appear in the mid-1980s. Several of the more prominent monographs were published in the 1990s and studies continue in a similar vein in the twenty-first century.

In feminist studies of the *Gospel of Mary*, scholars have decided that the Mary of the lost gospel is Mary Magdalene and have called for a review of her legend. In Susan Haskins’s *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (1993) the author recommends that we abandon myth and symbol in favour of “the true Mary Magdalene.”²² Similarly, Esther De Boer suggests moving “beyond the myth”²³ as the images of antiquity contain a “historical nucleus”²⁴ that the medieval material lacks. In both cases, the medieval Mary is rejected as a product of the patriarchy, while the *Gospel of Mary* is offered as a true portrait of a historical figure, who worked alongside Jesus of Nazareth.

²⁰ Hannele Koivunen, *The Woman who Understood Completely* (Helsinki: Imatra, 1994), p. 14.

²¹ Prominent feminist scholar Julia Kristeva held this view very strongly, and this concept has been at the heart of the feminist approach to the study of religion. See Fang-Long Shih, ‘Women, Religions and Feminisms’, in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), p. 232.

²² Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 399.

²³ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 122.

²⁴ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 118.

Gospel of Mary

This desire to determine the ‘true’ nature of Mary by attempting to locate her in history bears similarities to ‘the quest for the historical Jesus’, a scholarly tradition of the nineteenth century associated with Hermann Samuel Reimarus, David Strauss, and Ernest Renan. These writers rejected Biblical accounts because they depicted supernatural events, and sought to discover the historical Jesus through the use of all available sources, including non-canonical texts.²⁵ Although this may sound like a move away from a theological approach, towards the secular historical tradition, the ‘historical Jesus’ was sought with an interest in revising the dominant discourses within Christianity at the time, as the authority of the historical Jesus would trump his ‘mythological’ authority. The study of ancient texts from the early Christian period is often a quest for the most ‘authentic’ and unadulterated messages. It is for this reason that certain scholars state that the *Gospel of Thomas* is the most faithful representation of Jesus’ message based on the age of the document in comparison to later finds.²⁶ In a religion, like Christianity, that places ultimate value on the ‘truth’ of God’s message, it is understandable that hegemonic religious discourses are contested using alternate markers of ‘truth’ like archaeological evidence. In the case of the *Gospel of Mary*, the significance of these papyrus fragments has been exaggerated by feminists and used as a hook to draw readers into a more complex and longstanding debate about women in Christianity.

In the study of ancient texts relating to Christianity, favour is given to earliest sources as they come closest to the point where the message of God originated. The concept of a pure, unadulterated Christian message that spilled across the globe following Christ’s ascension is built upon the theological belief that the Word of God was proclaimed at a certain time, without error. Marginalising the significance of the period in which the physical copies of the *Gospel of Mary* were written, scholars have sought to position these artifacts as early as possible, and where an early date cannot be justified, the ‘oral tradition’ has been called upon in order to link the text to the time when Mary was believed to have lived.²⁷ It is uncontested that the Greek fragments of the gospel were written in the third century, and the

²⁵ Martin C. Albl, *Reason, Faith and Tradition: Explorations in Catholic Theology* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2009), pp. 276-279.

²⁶ Albl, *Reason, Faith and Tradition*, p. 279.

²⁷ See Amy Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Mariology* (Edinburgh: A&C Black, 2005), p. 165.

Coptic in the fifth, yet these are possibly copies of earlier versions of the gospel that are now lost.

De Boer reasons that attitudes towards women expressed in the canon²⁸ prove that the original gospel was written between 90 and 150 CE, yet it could be even earlier in date due to oral transmission.²⁹ King dates the gospel to “sometime in the late first or early second centuries,”³⁰ and elsewhere she has suggested that the gospel could be dated as early as 32 CE, as it makes reference to the death of Jesus; an event that can allegedly be dated from other sources.³¹ Tuckett dates the gospel in the “early half of the second century” as it “presupposes” other gospels that can be dated earlier.³² King favours the Greek texts as she claims they contain an earlier, more favourable, attitude towards women.³³ Tuckett disagrees, and concludes that the later Coptic text represents a more original version than the Greek fragments.³⁴ Walter Till and H. C. Puech had originally suggested that the gospel consisted of two separate writings that had been conjoined at a later date.³⁵ However, subsequent studies have tended to consider the text to work as a whole. Feminist theologians are not alone, however, in seeking to date archaeological evidence as close to Jesus’ lifetime as possible. The period associated with Jesus’ life (if he was indeed a historical person) has a halo of authority that later eras cannot possess.

Many of the feminist accounts mentioned in this article were written in order to be accessible to a popular as well as an academic audience and passages from other Gnostic texts are quoted as if they had come from the *Gospel of Mary*.³⁶ Alongside canonical quotations such as

²⁸ De Boer compares Paul’s supposed gender neutrality in Galatians 3:28 with the stance of patriarchal dominance expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:13, and 1 Corinthians 11:3. See De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 76-79.

²⁹ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 79.

³⁰ King, ‘The Gospel of Mary’, p. 360.

³¹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, p. 183.

³² Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, p. 11.

³³ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, pp. 183-184.

³⁴ Based upon linguistic features (for instance, the use of shortened expressions in the Greek that are extant in full in the Coptic version). See Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*, pp. 10, 129.

³⁵ See King, in Parrott, *Nag Hammadi Codices*, p. 454.

³⁶ These sources are accurately referenced in footnotes but are not always introduced in light of their origin and context.

Gospel of Mary

John 20:1-18,³⁷ one finds a series of references from non-canonical works such as the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*. De Boer's chapter on the *Gospel of Mary* itself opens with an unexplained quotation from the *Psalm of Heracleides* (a fourth century Manichaean text), presumably to create a sense of intimacy that is not present in the *Gospel of Mary*.³⁸ Similarly misleading quotations include Meyer's use of *The Da Vinci Code* (a piece of fiction written by Dan Brown that has subsequently been made into a film exploring various conspiracy theories related to the lineage springing from Jesus and Mary Magdalene) in order to explain the context of the gospel.³⁹ Also, Schaberg and Carla Ricci frequently quote passages to evoke a certain mood rather than using them to critically argue a point. Ricci's text opens with the words "Mary!"... "Master!" in order to romanticise the connection between Mary and Jesus.⁴⁰

This deliberate tactic has been employed in order to create the impression that the gospel contains revolutionary content that contradicts existing views within the church. Attention is only given to context when strange terminology is present. For instance, in the *Gospel of Thomas* 114 Peter says "Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus replies, "Look, I will draw her in so as to make her male, so that she too may become a living male spirit, similar to you... Every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."⁴¹ Rose Horman Arthur explains this by saying that, "The Coptic probably reflects the Greek... which means 'make brave and

³⁷ This long quotation recounts Mary's visit to the tomb where she mistakes Jesus for a gardener. Jesus says her name, and it dawns upon her who he is and she says 'Rabboni' (Master). Jesus says, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father", and instructs her to tell his brothers what she has seen.

³⁸ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 74.

³⁹ Meyer and De Boer, *The Gospel of Mary*, pp. vii-xix.

⁴⁰ Carla Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women who Followed Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Burns and Oats, 1994), title page.

⁴¹ Translation by Stephen J. Patterson and James M. Robinson, 'The Gospel of Thomas', *The Gnosis Archive*, at http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gth_pat_rob.htm. Accessed 25/10/15.

strong,' a word commonly used in early Christian paranesis."⁴² Such gendered terminology definitely requires contextualisation, however, some scholars have favoured new translations of terms that are conveniently compatible with feminist thinking. For instance, "Son of Man" appears in earlier translations like Wilson and MacRae, yet, is abandoned by King in favour of "child of true humanity,"⁴³ while De Boer replaces the term with "Human Being".⁴⁴

Out of the variety of readings of the *Gospel of Mary*, the most common is that which presents Mary and Peter as adversaries in a battle over the future of Christianity. For Katherine Jansen, Mary represents gnosis and visionary understanding, because as a woman, she can understand things intuitively, while Peter represents "acquired understanding."⁴⁵ Similarly Elaine Pagels,⁴⁶ R. Schmid,⁴⁷ De Boer,⁴⁸ and Koivunen⁴⁹ depict Peter as the embodiment of Christian 'orthodoxy' that seeks to silence Mary, who represents Gnostic Christianity. Koivunen takes this one step further by claiming that the dualistic symbolism of virgin and whore typical of later Christianity is a part of the same process of dualistic demonisation that can be found in the polemic writings on the Gnostics, and in Peter's attitude towards Mary in several Gnostic gospels.⁵⁰ Due to the fact that these texts are used to clarify our knowledge of the 'historical' Magdalene, serious distortions have occurred where the symbolic and linguistic features of Gnostic texts are not fully contextualised. The *Gospel of Philip* features the passage:

There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary (59:6-11).⁵¹

⁴² Rose Horman Arthur, *The Wisdom Goddess: Feminine Motifs in Eight Nag Hammadi Documents* (Lanham, MD and London: University Press of America, 1984), p. 19.

⁴³ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 81-86.

⁴⁵ Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979), pp. 13-14.

⁴⁷ Koivunen, *The Woman who Understood Completely*, pp. 200-201.

⁴⁸ De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Koivunen, *The Woman who Understood Completely*, pp. 13-14.

⁵⁰ Koivunen, *The Woman who Understood Completely*, pp. 276-277.

⁵¹ Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, p. 228.

Gospel of Mary

In his analysis of the significance of these figures, Richard Bauckham claims that Valentinian texts are known to allegorise gospel narratives and that the three Marys are symbolic of feminine spiritual powers “who are related to Jesus as his mother, his sister and his consort.”⁵² Without adequate contextualisation, symbolic devices can potentially be mistaken as evidence of historical personages.⁵³

Rhetoric Amongst the Analysis

From an objective point of view, the papyrus fragments that comprise the *Gospel of Mary* are ancient artifacts that are capable of providing scholars insight into the religious culture of those who produced them. However, feminist theological analyses have dominated scholarship on the gospel, sidelining alternate readings. What is more problematic is that feminist theologians appear to operate according to their own set of academic criteria wherein evidence is secondary to the objectives of investigation. Haskins speaks of the power of the *Gospel of Mary* in terms of righting wrongs against women: “Symbolism has done her an injustice; modern scholarship has made restitution possible.”⁵⁴ Haskins frames her argument in terms of affecting attitudinal change within the church for the benefit of women today saying a “more accurate picture [of Mary Magdalene] will have greater resonance for the majority of women looking for more active roles both within and outside the Church.”⁵⁵ Similarly, King sees the *Gospel of Mary* as a document that both justifies women’s leadership and contests existing understandings of Jesus’ message:

these scant pages provide an intriguing glimpse into a kind of Christianity lost for almost 1500 years. This astonishingly brief narrative presents a radical interpretation of Jesus’ teachings as a path to inner spiritual knowledge; it rejects his suffering and death as a path to eternal life; it exposes the erroneous view that Mary of Magdala was a prostitute for what it is – a piece of theological fiction; it presents the most straightforward and convincing argument in any early Christian writing for the legitimacy of women’s leadership; it offers a sharp critique of illegitimate power and a

⁵² Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, pp. 228-229. He also notes a translation error, and replaces ‘her’ with ‘his’ sister.

⁵³ The scholars considered in this article often speak of Mary as if she were a real person, yet most eventually address the question of whether Mary wrote the gospel that bears her name, and conclude that this is unlikely.

⁵⁴ Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 399-400.

⁵⁵ Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 399.

utopian vision of spiritual perfection; it challenges our rather romantic views about the harmony and unanimity of the first Christians; and it asks us to rethink the basis for church authority. All written in the name of a woman.⁵⁶

The tension at work in feminist theology between a scholarly pursuit of the truth and political goals is summed up in Haskins' concluding comment:

So long as the Church chooses to disregard the new scholarship which has reinterpreted the women in the gospels – so easily dismissed by calling it feminist – it will continue to subordinate the 'real' Mary Magdalene in favour of 'mother Mary.' That is, it will deny her her active role in the ministry of the Church at a time when her modern counterparts are seeking their own role in the institution.⁵⁷

It is important to note that as a feminist theologian, Haskins is more concerned with dominant *theological* discourse than any other form of scholarship on the gospel. As such, feminist theological readings of the *Gospel of Mary* should be understood as being a part of a broader debate about gender within the Christian tradition. From this perspective, feminist theological writings can be quite fruitfully studied as a form of 'insider discourse' that reveals the priorities and progress of the women's movement within the church. However, from another perspective, rhetorical language distorts scholarly knowledge of historical artifacts like the *Gospel of Mary*. This has a wider effect as subsequent scholarship inevitably picks up on earlier material while attempting to establish basic information about the gospel. For example, Tuckett's study does not indulge in feminist rhetoric and he keeps theological interests at bay (to a certain extent), yet he admits that his work is heavily based upon King's and he cites her extensively. Even in terms of dating the gospel, agendas are at work as the gospel is characterised as evidence of a feminist view, and then placed as early as possible. While the objective scholar should not care one way or another when a text originated, those presenting Mary as the champion of women seek to concretise their goals for the future by establishing their 'origin' in the past.

Schaberg's *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene* (2002) provides an extreme example of the scholarly distortion of meaning when analysing ancient writings like the *Gospel of Mary*. The author maps out her approach, informing the reader that she will choose 'evidence' that supports her argument, and consciously omit other information because, above all,

⁵⁶ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁷ Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 399.

Gospel of Mary

feminist scholarship aims to empower social change,⁵⁸ and destabilise patriarchy.⁵⁹ As a part of this project, she decides to characterise “The Jesus Movement”⁶⁰ as “egalitarian”⁶¹ and “democratic,”⁶² before inventing an imaginary ‘lost text’ behind John 20 and the *Gospel of Mary* that was systematically repressed.⁶³ Then, without any explanation she begins to use the term “Magdalene Christianity,”⁶⁴ giving it a whole host of descriptive features. According to Schaberg, Magdalene Christianity “would have privileged surprise over order. I see Magdalene Christianity as disconcerting, demanding, and horribly vulnerable. It attempted the impossible. It represented wo/men’s empowering speech and sanity.”⁶⁵ She goes on to speculate:

Can there be a centre of democratic power, with commitment to the full humanity of women and men, to multiple perspectives, collective conversation and debate? Can art and theologies and mysticism and action for social justice be produced which free up resources through egalitarian collaboration? Can there be (is there) a religion of Outsiders?... Magdalene Christianity offers an alternative and a challenge to Petrine Christianity, which has never been able to silence it.”⁶⁶

Schaberg’s statements are deeply misleading, painting a picture of a centuries-old battle between ‘Magdalene’ and ‘Petrine’ Christianities that is not supported by evidence. For Schaberg, it is justifiable to make unsubstantiated claims if they have the potential to improve the position of women:

The contemporary experience that encouraged this work is the women’s movement and feminist scholarship. If I have failed to present a convincing, comprehensive reconstruction or reading, I hope I have failed well enough to destabilise existing ‘authoritative’ readings and the oppressiveness of the whole Magdalene tradition, to suggest at least to some readers new lines of research, and encourage the desire to continue undermining and trespassing.⁶⁷

⁵⁸ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, pp. 258-259.

⁵⁹ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 352.

⁶⁰ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 207.

⁶¹ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 207.

⁶² Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 302.

⁶³ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 340.

⁶⁴ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 348.

⁶⁵ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 348.

⁶⁶ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, p. 352.

One may argue that it does not improve the political position of women to anchor their legitimacy in questionable research practices. However, it is true that many of the ideas that are championed by feminist theologians have found their way into popular culture, and in that realm, the legend of Mary Magdalene has been significantly altered.

Conclusion

As we have seen, feminist theologians have sought the historical Mary Magdalene at the core of a lost gospel, and have not necessarily found her. What seems to be up for contention in these studies is the symbolic language of Christianity itself and whether it should be considered oppressive to women. Importantly, Magdalene scholarship of this kind should be recognised as an insider discourse, wherein women seek to revise Christianity itself through alternate exegesis and through the use of new material from non-canonical sources. As two trends in religious scholarship coincided (that is, the study of ‘femaleness’ in Christianity, and the reassessment of Gnosticism and Christian origins), Gnosticism was aligned with the oppressed women of Christian history.

When the term ‘Gnostic’ was put under the spotlight after the Nag Hammadi finds, those seeking to re-classify Gnostic traditions as ‘alternative’ Christianities, contributed to a somewhat misleading association between Gnosticism and counterculture, including women’s liberation movements. Although such studies attempted to depict the legend of Mary Magdalene as culturally constructed, and therefore false, Christianity has always been culturally constructed, and the process of cultural construction is most certainly evident in the contemporary academic search for the ‘true’ Mary. As myriad Gnostic texts were gathered together and presented in conjunction with the *Gospel of Mary*, this created the impression of a rich Magdalene mythology that was brand new, topical, and grounded in the time of Christian origins. The overall picture presented was one where Mary was Jesus’ most beloved disciple; courageous, outspoken, loyal to Christ and privy to secret teachings. She was the quintessential female leader whose authority was granted by Jesus himself. Although the study of the *Gospel of Mary* has made a positive contribution to the study of female figures in Gnosticism and early Christianity, it is uncertain whether it is possible to know anything concrete about the ‘true Mary’ based upon current evidence. What we have seen, however, is a mythological revolution, wherein the popular and most

Gospel of Mary

frequently encountered version of Mary Magdalene has been given a new face.