

MARY MAGDALENE AS MAJOR WITNESS TO JESUS' RESURRECTION

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THE TITLE of this article demands a definition of terms. Though most readers will immediately recognize Mary Magdalene as a historical person, and some may still (wrongly) identify her with "the woman who was a sinner" (Lk 7:37), nevertheless the terms "major witness" and "resurrection" are often understood in different ways by diverse persons. Indeed, in first-century Judaism women were not qualified to testify in trials as witnesses¹ ("From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex; neither let slaves bear witness . . .").² Thus, if "witness" were applied to Mary Magdalene in the legal context of those times, the title of this article would involve a contradiction in terms. Some people consider "resurrection" to be merely an idea³ or, at the other extreme, the simple resuscitation of a corpse rather than the new, transformed life for a unique person, Jesus Christ.

The fact that some women, and Mary Magdalene in particular, were cited by the New Testament as witnesses for the resurrection evoked scorn from those who opposed early Christianity. Origen needed to refute the charge that belief in the risen Jesus was based on the testimony of a "hysterical female," and perhaps by someone else (Peter?).⁴ In various forms this prejudice against accepting women as witnesses has continued through the centuries. For instance, Ernest Renan built up Mary Mag-

¹ "Witness" is often used in contemporary English in much the same way it is used in the Bible; cf. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978). The two definitions which interest us concern the actual testimony and the one who gives the testimony.

² Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* (4, 8, 15), tr. H. St. J. Thackeray (New York: Putnam, 1930) 580-81. That women are not qualified as witnesses is an old and generally held (therefore anonymously transmitted) principle; see especially Mishnah *Shebueoth* 4:1; cf. Deut 19:17 (H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum NT aus Talmud und Midrasch* 3 [Munich: Beck, 1926] 560c). Only in those very seldom and very urgent cases where one witness only is sufficient, is a woman admitted as a witness (see Mishnah, *Rosh ha-Shanah* 1:8; also *Encyclopedia Judaica* 16, 586).

³ Milan Machovec, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 168-69.

⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2, 55 (tr. H. Chadwick [Cambridge: University, 1953] 109-10).

dalene as *the* (hallucinated) witness, whose love made her imagine that Jesus was personally risen and whose testimony convinced the other disciples.⁵

The early “witnesses” of the risen Jesus were the ones who got Christianity going. We know much about some and almost nothing about others. We have enough data to write books about Peter and Paul, yet we possess very few historical facts about Mary Magdalene. That only adds to the confusion and controversy. This lack of knowledge does not diminish her importance but demands that we rightly interpret it. She was great enough for Pope Leo the Great, soon after the Council of Chalcedon, to call her a “figure of the Church” (“... Maria Magdalene personam Ecclesiae gerens . . .”),⁶ and, a century later, for Pope Gregory the Great to refer to her as another Eve who announces not death but life.⁷ Even before them, in the third century, Hippolytus of Rome referred to the women at the tomb of Jesus as “apostles,”⁸ which developed into Mary Magdalene often being called the *apostola apostolorum*. Yet others like Celsus, Renan, and in our own time even a staunchly orthodox writer like Ricciotti⁹ have downplayed her importance.

For the purposes of this article we will define “witness” as someone who has firsthand knowledge of facts or events. A major witness is one whose testimony is of greatest importance and/or is the most complete. By “resurrection” we mean the unique act by which God transformed and raised for ever the person Jesus to His right hand (cf. Gal 1:1: “Paul, an apostle . . . through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him

⁵ Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1863) 434–35. He believed that the strong personality of Jesus and the passionate love Mary had for him led her to assert that he had risen.

⁶ Leo the Great, *De ascensione Domini serm.* 2, 4 (SC 74, 141–42).

⁷ Gregory the Great, *De apparitione Christi Magdalenae facta* (Patrum opuscula selecta 2, hom. 25 [Innsbruck: Libreria Academica Wagneriana, 1892] 189).

⁸ Hippolytus of Rome, *De Cantico* 24–26 (CSCO 264, 43–49).

⁹ Giuseppe Ricciotti, *The Life of Christ* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1947). Ricciotti concedes the fact that the women around Jesus were faithful and generous, and that Mary Magdalene is the first named by the three Synoptic writers as visiting the grave of Jesus after his burial (650–51). Although she and the other women found the tomb empty and encountered the angel(s) who announced that Jesus had risen and asked them to spread the news, nevertheless, later, even after the apostles and the entire Church were convinced that Jesus had risen, there was a prejudice against appealing to the testimony of women (653). Ricciotti believes that the early Church acted thus for prudent reasons: not to give Jews and idolaters the impression that too much credence was placed in overimaginative women given to spreading tales (*ibid.*). More recently than Ricciotti, Francesco Spadafora (*La risurrezione di Gesù* [Rovigo: Istituto Padano Arti Grafiche, 1978] 204) argues that the appearance to Mary Magdalene is not as important as those to the apostles—the Jerusalem appearances are not as important as those in Galilee—since those in Galilee are connected with the foundation of the Church.

from the dead" [RSV]). The evidence on which the witnesses relied to assert this came from (1) appearances to them of the risen and transformed Jesus and (2) their discovery of the empty tomb. These appearances had a profound, transforming effect on the lives of those who had known and been associated with Jesus during his brief life on this planet.

NEW TESTAMENT DATA

To analyze Mary Magdalene's role as major witness to the resurrection, let us begin by examining the New Testament data. Joseph Fitzmyer, in the second volume of his commentary on Luke's Gospel, lists and describes the six Resurrection narratives which are found in the Gospel tradition:

1. Mk 16:1-8. The discovery of the empty tomb by the women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome). A "young man" charges them to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus goes before them to Galilee, where they will see him. The women flee and say nothing to anyone, "for they were afraid." There are no appearances of the risen Christ.

2. Mt 28:1-20. The discovery of the empty tomb by two women (Mary Magdalene and another Mary). An angel and then Jesus appears to them and tells them to break the news to the others. Later on, the risen Christ appears to the Eleven in Galilee and commissions them to make disciples, to teach, and to baptize.

3. Lk 23:56b-24:53. This narrative consists of five episodes: (a) the finding of the empty tomb by the women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and others); they are told by the two men in gleaming robes to recall the words Jesus had addressed to them while he was still in Galilee; the women leave and report it all to the Eleven, who regard their stories as so much nonsense; Peter alone goes off to see for himself (and then the risen Christ appears to him). (b) The risen Christ appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus; (c) Christ appears to the Eleven and their companions in Jerusalem; (d) he commissions them to be "witnesses of this" and to preach in his name; and (e) he leads them out to Bethany, where he parts from them and is carried off to heaven on Easter Sunday night.

4. Jn 20:1-29. The discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene, who tells Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. This is followed by the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary, his appearance to disciples in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday evening, with Thomas absent, and his appearance a week later, with Thomas present.

5. Jn 21:1-23 (the appendix to the Johannine Gospel). The risen Christ appears to seven disciples who have been fishing on the Sea of Tiberias,

after which Simon Peter is commissioned to feed Christ's sheep. This section presents the contrasting roles of Peter and the beloved disciple.

6. Mk 16:9-20 (the Marcan appendix). Three appearances in the Jerusalem area on the first day of the week. The first of these is to Mary Magdalene; the second is to two disciples walking into the country, who go back and report it to disbelieving disciples; the third is to the Eleven, whom Christ upbraids for disbelief and finally commissions to preach the gospel to all creation. Christ is then taken up into heaven, seated at the right hand of God, and the disciples go forth to preach.¹⁰

What should strike the reader of this schematic presentation is the fact that Mary Magdalene is mentioned in five out of the six Gospel narratives and, when mentioned, is always the first person named. Is this merely accidental or were the Gospel writers recognizing her importance? Fitzmyer (apropos of point 3 above) notes that reference is first made to some women of Galilee even though their testimony does not engender faith and is even discredited by the apostles (1543). Raymond Brown, in his comments on Jn 20:10 (point 4 above), says: "The real purpose of this verse is to get the disciples off the scene and give the stage to Magdalene."¹¹

In these six Gospel narratives Peter is mentioned by name in four (1, 3, 4, 5 above) and is spoken of together with Mary Magdalene in three (1, 3, 4). Peter is not mentioned in Mt 28, the chapter which announces both the resurrection and the postresurrection command to evangelize the world.

INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

We have recalled the basic New Testament data about Mary Magdalene as Easter witness. What do exegetes and theologians make of that data?

Rudolf Bultmann compares the account of the Easter appearances as found in Jn 20 with those of the Synoptic Gospels. He notes that in John's account Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Christ when he calls her by name. Bultmann points to the meaning which this narrative undoubtedly has: ". . . the shepherd knows his sheep and 'calls them by name' (10.3), and when they hear his voice they recognize him. Perhaps we may also add: the naming of the name tells a man what he is; and to be known in such a way leads a man to the encounter with the Revealer."¹² Bultmann qualifies this by asserting that Mary Magdalene cannot enter

¹⁰ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (X-XXIV)* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985) 1535-37.

¹¹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John (XII-XXI)* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970) 988.

¹² Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 686.

into fellowship with Christ until she has recognized him as the Lord who is with the Father (687). Her message to the disciples is the core of Easter faith: understanding the offense of the cross (688). In contrast to Luke's account, nothing is said about the impression her message makes on the disciples (689).

Edwyn Hoskyns also speaks of the shepherd-sheep image¹³ and believes that the message which Mary Magdalene was to deliver to the disciples was "that the new order, the order of the powerful action of the Spirit of God, the New Covenant, was now imminent" (543). He points out that while in the three Synoptic Gospels Mary Magdalene is the first woman named in the Easter texts, in the Fourth Gospel "the emphasis rests entirely upon the appearance of the Lord to Mary and upon the words which he addressed to her" (*ibid.*).

C. H. Dodd compares the postresurrection scenes in the Gospels and then evaluates them. He considers Mt 28 to mean that Christ comes in glory to reign over all.¹⁴ He believes that for Luke the appearances have evidential value: the apostles know that the Lord is alive and will come again (*ibid.*). John's Gospel presents the appearances as the renewal of Jesus' personal relations with the apostles. The appearances help to consolidate the renewed contact (442-43). Dodd thus passes over the women's significance.

C. K. Barrett takes Jn 20 to be dependent on the older tradition of 1 Cor 15:5-8 and Mk 16:1-8.¹⁵ In the older tradition nothing is said of an appearance to Mary Magdalene. Barrett believes that Jn 20 intends to give the central place to the beloved disciple (*ibid.*). This, of course, reduces the significance of the women to almost nothing.

Though women, and in particular Mary Magdalene, were chronologically the first to encounter the risen Christ according to John, Matthew, and the Marcan appendix, does that make them the major or even the most important witnesses of the resurrection? In the oldest account of the postresurrection appearances St. Paul writes that "[Christ] appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:5-8 [*RSV*]). No specific mention of women as witnesses to the resurrection is found here (nor elsewhere in the New Testament except for the Gospels), and a priority of importance and time seems to be given to

¹³ Edwyn Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 542.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University, 1953) 440.

¹⁵ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 466.

Cephas. Bernard, commenting on this passage in the International Critical Commentary, notes the absence of any reference to Mary Magdalene and asserts that the Church's faith in the resurrection is based on the appearances to the leaders of the future Church (Peter and James).¹⁶

Are the resurrection appearances (and those who witnessed to them) a necessary part of the Easter faith? Were they part of the early Church preaching of the Easter faith? Hans Kessler, in his recent book on the resurrection, acknowledges the importance of the appearances but spends most of his time on the Pauline material rather than on the Gospel accounts.¹⁷ William Thompson notes how some have argued that these appearances were neither necessary for faith nor always part of the early preaching:

Koester and Schillebeeckx build a somewhat strong case on the fact that there are apparently quite early kerygmata which do not mention Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus is proclaimed, in these, as (1) the coming Lord of the future (1 Cor 16:22; Rev 22:20; 1 Cor 15:51-52; Lk 17:24), as (2) the divine miracle worker (Acts 2:22; 2 Cor 3:1; 5:12; 4:5), as (3) Holy Wisdom's envoy/Wisdom itself (Lk 11:49-51; Mt 11:27; Phil 2:6-11; Jn 1:1-16).¹⁸

Yet, if we ask ourselves whether the postresurrection appearances are necessary to resurrection belief, we must keep in mind 1 Cor 15:5-8 and Lk 24:34, where they are considered essential. Thompson himself opts for the death-resurrection model (and the importance of the appearance tradition) because the New Testament and later Christianity prefer this model over others (223). After he points out that some biblical scholars reconstruct the historical evidence without pursuing the possible meaning

¹⁶ J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel according to John* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928) 671. A different emphasis is given to 1 Corinthians 15 by Hans Conzelmann (*1 Corinthians* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975]), who believes that Paul mentioned only those appearances which fit his purposes in writing this epistle. "The first appearance, to Cephas . . . , is not recorded in the Gospels and only alluded to in one passage, Lk 24:34. Historically speaking, it was the reason for the status of Peter in the primitive church and probably for the founding of the circle of the Twelve. The latter is then legitimized by a further appearance. That the circle arose only after the death of Jesus is already plain from the number: that Jesus appeared to 'the Twelve'" (256-57). This last assertion certainly does not enjoy universal acceptance. An example of someone who holds the opposite view is Ben F. Meyer (*The Aims of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1979] 153-54): "The historicity of the deliberate act of choosing twelve disciples to participate most intimately in his mission (Mark 3:13f. par.; 6:7-13 parr.; cf. Matt. 19:28 par.) is beyond reasonable doubt. . . ." "Jesus, moreover, made the twelve more than a sign of the future. He gave them a share in its coming-to-be, by sending them (Mark 6:7 parr.) in groups of two (Mark 6:7) to enlist Israel's welcome of the reign of God (Mark 3:14; Matt. 10:7; Luke 9:2)."

¹⁷ Hans Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1985). The main reason Kessler concentrates on Paul is that he has doubts about the reliability of the Gospel accounts (cf. 117-18, 121).

¹⁸ William Thompson, *The Jesus Debate* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 222.

of resurrection in our experience, Thompson urges the student to complement historical research with a more philosophical-theological form of analysis which tries to tackle experiential questions. He adds that "some theologians needlessly ignore the possibility of exploring possible experiential correlates to the resurrection belief, thus passing over its significance for us today" (227).¹⁹

Thompson finds an example of such an "experiential correlate" in the fact that a person can continue to keep on trusting after the death of a loved one (a "foretaste" of resurrection in our own experience). Another example which he gives is a person's experience of passing from ignorance, bias, and bigotry to greater insight, less bias, and more openness as a kind of death-resurrection passage (228).

Thompson believes that the striking role of women in the resurrection texts is a strong tradition which contains an important lesson for us (232). He recalls the view endorsed by some biblical scholars that women were only unofficial witnesses of the resurrection, while the "real" witnesses were the male disciples, especially Peter. In fact, in some texts Peter enjoys a primary role as witness (e.g., 1 Cor 15:5; Lk 24:34; Mk 16:7; Jn 20:1-10). But, Thompson continues, "The point is still secure: in the tradition women are the first witnesses, regardless of any role that Peter may play or may have come to play in the Church" (232).²⁰

¹⁹ Two prominent contemporary theologians who would agree that the appearances are extremely important are Walter Kasper (*Jesus the Christ* [New York: Paulist, 1976]) and Hans Kung (*On Being a Christian* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976]). Kasper says (129): "I have already mentioned the irreconcilable divergences between the kerygmatic tradition and the Easter stories. But the two traditions are not unified within themselves. . . . In spite of these irreconcilable divergences all traditions agree on one thing: Jesus appeared to certain disciples after his death; he proved himself living and was proclaimed to have risen from the dead. This is the centre, the core, where all traditions meet." Kung asserts (348-49): "But a reduction of all the appearances—to the twelve (the controlling body in Jerusalem), to James (the brother of Jesus), to all the disciples (the greater circle of missionaries), to more than five hundred brethren, to Paul himself—to the one appearance to Peter, as if the former were merely to confirm the latter, is not justified by these or other texts." Kung grants that there might be and probably are elaborations in the Gospel appearance stories, but he adds (364): "Perhaps the series of witnesses in its original form could even be reduced to that one woman whom all the Gospels unanimously present as a single witness and whom John makes the sole witness: Mary Magdalene (Mary, the mother of Jesus, oddly enough, plays no part at all among the witnesses of the resurrection)."

²⁰ A typical example of one who diminishes the importance of the appearance to women over against those to the male disciples is M.-J. Lagrange (*Evangile selon saint Marc* [Paris: Gabalda, 1929]). He proposes three categories of appearances: the first to the apostles and disciples, the second to the women who had supported him, and the third to his mother. In this scheme the appearance(s) to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:1-8) and her companion (Mt 28:9-10) become rewards for fidelity and mere preparations for the appearances that are truly significant for the Church and her teaching: these are to the male apostles and disciples (449).

When Rudolf Schnackenburg comments on John's Gospel,²¹ especially John 20, he notes that the events on the morning of Easter Sunday are held together as one whole through Mary Magdalene (301). John's concentration on Mary Magdalene is not surprising, because of his tendency to bring individual persons to the fore (305). Schnackenburg believes that the choice of Mary Magdalene as a messenger of the Risen One is not the creation of the fourth Evangelist but taken over from his source (308). He adds that Mary's encounter with the Risen One "represents for the evangelist the climax, which, according to his Christological thought, he emphasizes strongly" (315).

In the end, however, Schnackenburg does what Ricciotti and others do: he subordinates the testimony of women to that of the male disciples. He uses Luke rather than Paul to establish his case:

The reference to the oldest list of appearances in 1 Cor 15:5-8, in which such a Christophany to Mary Magdalene or still more women is lacking, is, admittedly, no serious counter-argument, because the primitive Church obviously did not place any value on the testimony of women; but Luke's silence carries weight because he does assign a certain role to the women, but does not know of an appearance by Jesus to them (cf. 24:22-24). For John, the value of the story which he found is not on a historical but a theological level. In Mary's encounter with Jesus the meaning of Jesus' resurrection for the fellowship of the disciples finds expression; it forms a [mere?] prelude to Jesus' appearance before the disciples to whom the risen Lord gives the Spirit and grants authority (321).

This argument from Luke contrasts with an explanation given a few years earlier by Z. C. Hodges: "For Luke, the extended manifestation to two male witnesses at once is the heart of his resurrection narrative and its effect is not to be diminished by even an allusion to prior female witness. Accordingly, the evangelist's silence [about the appearances to women] is due to a literary tendency."²² Moreover, the claim that "the primitive Church obviously did not place any value on the testimony of women" is hardly compatible with the fact that all four Gospels report Jesus' tomb to have been found empty by one (John) or more (the Synoptics) women.

A middle course about women's testimony is that advocated by Hubert Ritt.²³ He believes that women are primarily associated with witnessing to the death of Jesus, but not to his resurrection. Their role is to focus attention on actions at the grave rather than on the Easter message.²⁴

²¹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* 3 (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

²² Z. C. Hodges, "The Women and the Empty Tomb," *Bibliotheca sacra* 13 (1966) 309.

²³ Hubert Ritt, "Die Frauen und die Osterbotschaft," *Die Frau im Urchristentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 1983) 117-33.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 130.

Women come to be mentioned in connection with the Easter message because two different narratives (Passion and Easter) are joined to form a literary unity. This is best seen in 1 Cor 15:3b-5, where in the kerygma of the early Church the death and burial of Jesus are briefly but clearly linked to his resurrection.²⁵ The New Testament accounts present women more as "addressees" of the Easter message than as witnesses.²⁶ The story of the women at the grave is connected with the Easter gospel ("Jesus now lives in a totally different way"), but it is above all the Twelve who guarantee the Easter gospel.²⁷ Even Jn 20:2 does not show the women as witnesses of the Easter gospel.²⁸ In fact Mark tells us that the reactions of the women to the angel's message were anxiety, fear, silence, and flight.²⁹ Ritt thus concludes that the women cannot be considered Easter witnesses since at most they give us only the message that Jesus had risen and not the full Easter gospel.

A year after the article by Ritt was published, François Bovon wrote specifically on Mary Magdalene for *New Testament Studies*.³⁰ He points out that exegetes have often considered the appearance to Mary Magdalene among later, popular additions to the text ("tardifs et légendaires" [51]). He believes, however, that it is important to examine possible reasons for the appearances being included in the overall structure of a Gospel or epistle. Since Peter was the first leader of the Church, he is obviously mentioned in 1 Cor 15:5, as James and the other apostles are in 1 Cor 15:7. The fact that Mary Magdalene is mentioned at all shows that the early Church considered her important and intended to include her as a witness.³¹ She has always been associated with Easter and the founding of the Church. Thus the Church has been careful to link her to the discovery of the empty tomb and mention her, a woman, as an authentic Easter witness.³²

Yet how do we explain that Mary Magdalene is missing from the names provided by 1 Cor 15:5-8? Bovon asserts that the list of people given by Paul represents a compromise between the Judeo-Christianity of Jerusalem (represented by Peter and James) and that of the Hellenistic world (represented by Paul himself). This compromise was made at the expense of other groups such as the Johannine Church. To include Mary Magdalene in a kerygmatic list would alienate some groups for several reasons:

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. 131.

²⁷ Ibid. 131-32.

²⁸ Ibid. 132.

²⁹ Ibid. 133.

³⁰ François Bovon, "Le privilège pascal de Marie-Madeleine," *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984) 50-62.

³¹ Ibid. 51.

³² Ibid. 51-52.

(1) those people from a Jewish background would not accept a woman's testimony; (2) the Church was concentrating on setting up a ministry of males hostile to prophetic witness; (3) a woman would detract from Peter and Paul, whom the early Church was emphasizing.³³

A scholar who from a feminist viewpoint has analyzed the role of women (and especially Mary Magdalene) as witnesses of the resurrection is Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza.³⁴ She points out the continuity of fidelity in the female disciples who had stood with Jesus in his suffering, sought to honor him in his death, and then became proclaimers of his resurrection (322). She relies on the work done by Raymond Brown (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple*) to assert that the discipleship and leadership of the Johannine community included both women and men, and that the " 'Johannine Christians, represented by the Beloved Disciple, clearly [regarded] themselves as closer to Jesus and more perceptive' than the churches who [claimed] Peter and the twelve as their apostolic authority" (326).

Schüssler-Fiorenza recognizes two traditions which coexist side by side in the accounts of the postresurrection appearances—the tradition of Mary Magdalene being the primary apostolic witness to the resurrection (Matthew, John, and Marcan appendix), and the tradition of the Petrine primacy (Paul and Luke). She finds it remarkable that these two independent streams of the Gospel tradition have both survived (332).³⁵ She points out that the role of women in the Church has always been the subject for much debate: patristic Christianity downplayed the significance of women, especially Mary Magdalene, as the primary witnesses of the resurrection, and highlighted figures like Peter, Paul, and the Twelve, whereas the noncanonical gospels claimed women disciples as apostolic authorities for the reception of revelation and secret teaching (304–5). Apocryphal writings of the second and third centuries which

³³ Ibid. 52.

³⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

³⁵ Schüssler-Fiorenza does not distinguish between the appearances (1) which took place in Galilee and (2) those in Jerusalem. Instead she simply says: "Whereas Matthew, John and Marcan appendix credit primacy of apostolic witness to Mary Magdalene, the Jewish Christian pre-Pauline confession in 1 Cor 15:3–6 and Luke claim that the resurrected Lord appeared first to Peter. Since the tradition of Mary Magdalene's primacy in apostolic witness challenged the Petrine tradition, it is remarkable that it has survived in two independent streams of the Gospel tradition. Moreover, later apocryphal writings—as we have seen—reflect the theological debate over the apostolic primacy of Mary Magdalene and Peter explicitly" (332). We should note, however, that biblical commentators more commonly classify the appearances as those (to Peter and others) in Galilee and those (to Mary Magdalene and others) in Jerusalem (cf. Raymond Brown, "John 21 and the First Appearance of the Risen Jesus to Peter," *Resurrexit* [Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974] 246).

speak of the competition between Peter and Mary Magdalene reflect the tension that existed on the question of primacy of apostolic authority. In fact, the “argument between Peter and Mary Magdalene clearly reflects the debate in the early church on whether women are the legitimate transmitters of apostolic revelation and tradition” (306).

Before we move on, let us make three points about Schüssler-Fiorenza’s position. Although she recognizes two postresurrection traditions that coexist in the New Testament, she does not distinguish between them in the way that exegetes usually do: the appearances which took place in Galilee (presumably to Peter, the Twelve, etc.) and those which occurred in and around Jerusalem (to Mary Magdalene, James, etc.). These postresurrection events were thus separated according to where different groups happened to be present at a given time rather than by any distinction between male apostles and female believers. Secondly, the very early Church writers (e.g., Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus) are quite silent about any debate as to whether women can legitimately transmit apostolic revelation and tradition. (In fact, Clement goes out of his way to praise women like Esther and Judith for what they had done for their people; cf. *1 Clem* 55.) Schüssler-Fiorenza herself admits it is (only) Gnostic and apocryphal writings which “claim women disciples as [separate?] apostolic authorities for the reception of revelation and secret teachings” (304). These writings belong to the second and third centuries. Nowhere in her book does she mention Mk 16:9–11, where Jesus is said to have appeared (chronologically) *first* to Mary Magdalene. Yet, in what follows (Mk 16:12–20) there is no suggestion of a conflict between Mary Magdalene and Peter as apostolic authorities. This important second-century addition to Mark’s Gospel (16:9–20) knows Mary Magdalene’s importance but fails to vindicate Schüssler-Fiorenza’s thesis. We must ask ourselves, therefore, whether the Gnostics accurately preserve what was present from the beginning. Are they reliable guides or just a decadent spin-off?³⁶ Thirdly, patristic

³⁶ Bovon says (50) that in the early Church the traditions about Mary Magdalene outside of Scripture were filled in and distorted not by the supporters of the universal Church but by various marginal movements such as Gnosticism and Encratism. Raymond Brown and others note that the tradition of an appearance to him probably provided the original context or catalyst for much New Testament material about Peter. The theme of Peter as receiver of special revelations was greatly developed in the apocrypha (cf. Raymond Brown et al., *Peter in the New Testament* [New York: Paulist, 1973] 165). The Marcan appendix (16:9–20) states that the risen Jesus appeared *first* to Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:9)—the only place in the New Testament where a chronological order of appearance is clearly mentioned. The dating of this appendix varies. Tischendorf, citing Irenaeus and Hippolytus, believes that it was already known in the second century (Constantinus Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum graece* 1 [Leipzig: Giesecke und Devrient, 1869] 406–7), while Metzger notes that “the traditional ending of Mark, so familiar through the AV and other translations of

Christianity at times downplayed the significance of women. Yet, as we saw, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, and others could pay remarkable tribute to the person of Mary Magdalene.

Schüssler-Fiorenza does not refer to PHEME PERKINS' book *The Gnostic Dialogue*, published three years earlier, which challenges the reliability of the Gnostic writings as guides to the origins and development of Christianity. Perkins wrote at a time when Elaine Pagels had just popularized the Gnostic/orthodox conflict. According to Perkins, Pagels, in *The Gnostic Gospels*, was mistaken in portraying the Gnostics "as champions of individual creativity against an increasingly repressive and unimaginative orthodoxy."³⁷

She [Pagels] claims that gnosis represents the form in which Christian symbols continue to inspire great creative artists, otherwise alienated by a rigid orthodox Christianity. Gnostics insist on the rights of the autonomous, creative human self. The preceding section has already taken issue with the historical inaccuracies in such presentations of the Gnostic/orthodox relationship. We have seen that

the Textus Receptus, is present in the vast number of witnesses. . . . The earliest patristic witnesses to part or all of the long ending are Irenaeus and the Diatessaron. It is not certain whether Justin Martyr was acquainted with the passage; in his *Apology* (1:45) he includes five words that occur, in a different sequence, in ver. 20" (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971] 124). The Marcan appendix, thus composed at the same time the Gnostic writers were disseminating their views, gives priority to the appearance to Mary Magdalene. C. S. Mann is more or less in agreement with the opinions of Tischendorf and Metzger. In his commentary on Mk 16:9-20 in the Anchor Bible series (*Mark* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986]) he writes: "In fact, in all the literature before the middle of the fourth century there are only two possible allusions to this anonymous ending. The first is in Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1:45): 'Going out, his apostles proclaimed' (or 'made a proclamation') 'everywhere.' The second is from Irenaeus, cited in Latin: 'At the end of his Gospel, Mark says, "And so the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was received into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father"' (674). Concerning vss. 9-11 of the Marcan appendix, Vincent Taylor's (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [New York: St. Martin's, 1966] 610) brief comment is: "The vocabulary and style of this section show clearly that it was not written by Mark, but is based on a knowledge of traditions found in Lk and Jn." Joseph Hug (*Le finale de l'Évangile de Marc* [Paris: Gabalda, 1978]) dates this ending of Mark's Gospel to the second third of the second century (214). He bases this judgment on the explicit witness of Irenaeus and the *Diatessaron* (A.D. 180) and the possible allusion by Justin Martyr and the *Epistola apostolorum* (middle of second century). Elsewhere he concludes that (1) Mk 16:9-11 does not depend on Jn 20:14-18 nor Mt 18:9-10; (2) Mk 16:9-11 comes from a common tradition underlying the parallel accounts and known besides from the Jewish anti-Christian polemics; and (3) Mk 16:9-11 does not reflect the language nor does it reproduce the themes of any parallel Gospel accounts, yet its themes are secondary except for the stress on the unbelief and perhaps the position given to Mary (165).

³⁷ PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1980) 205.

Gnostics did not have the picture of the autonomous, differentiated, creative self presupposed in this argument. Such a view of the self is largely the product of modern thought and presupposes a consciousness of self and world radically different from that of second- and third-century people (205).

In a later work Perkins refers favorably to Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's assertion that women were part of the larger group of witnesses from which a successor to Judas was chosen, and that they were also commissioned as missionaries.³⁸ Perkins, however, approaches her subject more from an exegetical point of view than from one which attempts to recruit the early Christian story for the purposes of a feminist theological reconstruction.³⁹

When Perkins compares Matthew's account of the resurrection (28:1-10) to that of Mark (16:1-8), she points out how the former clarifies ambiguities found in the Marcan account (126-30). Specifically, just as "Matthew made the figure at the tomb unmistakably an angel, so he attributes to the angel knowledge of the women's errand. He shifts the announcement of resurrection to the beginning of the angel's message. Thus he makes it clear that Jesus is not in the tomb because he has been raised. With the earlier apologetic emphasis on the posting of the guard at the tomb, there can be no other explanation for the absence of Jesus' body" (128). Perkins then adds: "The priority of the message that Jesus has been raised is also evident in the commission to the women. They are to go quickly and announce that Jesus has risen. Thus, they are primarily messengers of the resurrection" (129). She interprets Jesus' words to the women, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me" (Mt 28:10), as a command that the women must carry out the commission they had received from the angel.

Perkins' comments on Mt 28:16-20 contain her reflections on the role of Peter. After she points out that "and Peter" is missing from the angel's instruction to the women (though found in Mark's version), she says:

Matthew gives Peter primacy in the gospel as spokesperson for the disciples, as guardian of Jesus' interpretation of the Law, and as representative of the typical disciple, but he does not place Peter above the others. He is firmly anchored within the circle of disciples to whom the ministry of the post-Easter church is entrusted. One might even wonder if some scholars have gone too far in pushing

³⁸ Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City: N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 167.

³⁹ Robert Grant, in his review of Schüssler-Fiorenza's book, goes so far as to call it "a wholehearted attempt to rewrite traditional Christian history in favor of a feminist version" (cf. Robert Grant, "The Reconstruction of Christian Origins," *Journal of Religion* 65 [1985] 83).

1 Cor 15:5 to imply that the primacy that Peter enjoyed among the disciples was based on his rallying the others after his vision of the risen Lord (131-32).⁴⁰

Perkins concludes her analysis of the resurrection accounts of Mark and Matthew by arguing that there are three sources of primitive resurrection traditions behind the Gospel narratives. They are (1) the old kerygmatic tradition like that reflected in 1 Cor 15:3-5, (2) that of the empty tomb found by the women disciples, and (3) that of Christian prophets who speak in the name of the Lord, proclaiming his messianic exaltation (137).

In her comments on Luke's resurrection accounts (24:36-49) Perkins says that the commission to witness is intended for the entire group of those who have followed Jesus from Galilee. That group explicitly includes a number of women disciples of Jesus, and so this commissioning is also meant for them (167). She notes that in Lk 24:34 the phrase is used "The Lord has risen indeed and appeared to Simon," while in Jn 20:18 Mary Magdalene says "I have seen the Lord." Perkins believes that this deliberate replacement by John is an acknowledgment of Mary Magdalene's equality with Jesus' other disciples as a witness to the resurrection (177).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Before we draw conclusions, we should summarize the data we have presented. To examine Mary Magdalene's role as the major witness of the resurrection, we began by defining our terms. Not only is a witness one who has firsthand knowledge of a certain set of facts, but a major witness is one whose testimony is of greatest importance or the most complete. By resurrection we mean God's transformation of Jesus after his death to a new and glorified state. The evidence on which the Easter witnesses relied were Jesus' postresurrection appearances to them and the discovery of his empty tomb.

To support our topic, we examined Fitzmyer's analysis of the Gospel evidence. He listed six resurrection narratives. Mary Magdalene was mentioned in five of the six. When mentioned, she is always the first person named. We also cited Brown, who noted that in Jn 20:10 the Evangelist purposely arranged the material so that Mary Magdalene would have the stage.

The Gospels, however, are not the only scriptural evidence to be considered. The epistles of Paul are an earlier source, and in the earliest

⁴⁰ Perhaps Perkins more accurately should have said that Peter's primacy was "largely but not exclusively" based on his rallying the others after his vision of the risen Lord. Also, she ignores here Lk 24:34, not to mention Lk 22:32. Cf. Gerald O'Collins, "Peter as Easter Witness," *Heythrop Journal* 22 (1981) 18.

account of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-8) not only is no mention made of women but the importance of Cephas as a recipient of a postresurrection appearance is stressed. This would seem to be contrary to the evidence presented in the previous paragraph.

Various solutions have been offered to the above dilemma. Some examples are: (1) two traditions have survived, coexisting side by side; (2) two traditions have survived, one subordinate to the other (the Gospel accounts subordinate to that of Paul); (3) the appearances are not really a necessary part of the Easter faith, so why worry?

To further complicate the problem, we know that historically there was a prejudice against admitting women as witnesses. Not only did this prejudice exist at the time of Jesus, but even in the 20th century biblical commentators have tended to stress that the basis of faith in the resurrection comes from the male apostles and not from the testimony of women. If appearances were admitted as evidence, then only those to the (male) apostles were considered in any way as normative.

An examination of some writings of the "classical" commentators on Scripture, Bultmann, Hoskyns, Dodd, and Barrett, showed quite diverse opinions about the meaning and importance of the postresurrection appearances. Bultmann very positively considered Mary Magdalene to be the bearer of the core of the Easter faith, and Hoskyns portrayed her as the deliverer of the message that the New Covenant was imminent. Dodd, however, was interested in the appearances but not the women, while Barrett believed that only the beloved disciple was important in Jn 20, *the* Gospel chapter in which Mary Magdalene is most completely described.

Prejudice against women has been rightly challenged in recent years. This is seen especially in issues brought up by the feminist movement. Such a challenge has had its effect on the interpretation of Scripture and forced a rethinking of "traditional" positions. The title of this article is an example in point. Until recently few authors would have asserted that Mary Magdalene should be considered a major witness of the resurrection.

Though it can be said that postresurrection appearances are not as such the *object* of Easter faith, but rather the primary historical *catalyst* of it, nevertheless the Church has always recognized the essential importance of the appearance tradition. One who accepts this tradition should agree that women were the first or among the first witnesses. In this tradition women, especially Mary Magdalene, have a lead role. Above all, in John 20 Mary Magdalene is the human figure who holds the events together.

A question arises as to whether the appearance tradition which includes women (Gospels) is as important as that of the male leaders in the early

Church (1 Cor 15). To the extent that we admit the evidence from Gnostic and apocryphal writings of the second and third centuries, we will hold that even by then this question had not been satisfactorily resolved, since there was debate as to whether or not women were legitimate transmitters of revelation. By the sixth century, however, Pope Gregory the Great spoke of Mary Magdalene as being a new Eve who revealed life to males.

Rather than arguing for a priority of importance among the traditions, Pheme Perkins talks about the differences between them. This does not mean they are contradictory. After examining the New Testament evidence, she concludes that Peter is (1) the spokesperson for the disciples, (2) guardian of Jesus' interpretation of the law, (3) representative of the typical disciple but not above the others, (4) part of the group in charge of the post-Easter ministry of the Church (this last function not being based on any appearances). The women were (1) the primary messengers who were commanded to announce the resurrection, and (2) among those commissioned to witness. In addition, Mary Magdalene was considered equal to a (male) disciple as a witness for the resurrection.

This synthesis does not deny authority to Peter, nor does it ignore the fact that he was the recipient of a postresurrection appearance. It does, however, show the complementary roles of women, Peter, and the other disciples as witnesses to the risen Christ. Among the female recipients of the appearances, Mary Magdalene is portrayed in Scripture as having the primary role.