CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCLUSION

A common feature in the Gnostic writings which contain and use Mary Magdalene traditions is that in all of them she is given a significant position among the most intimate adherents of Jesus. She is not always the most central figure of the work (Gospel of Thomas, Psalms of Heracleides) or she shares this position with others (Sophia of Jesus Christ, Dialogue of the Savior, Pistis Sophia IV), but in none of the writings is she shown in a negative light.

Another characteristic trait in Gnostic Mary Magdalene texts is that in most of them she is introduced together with other disciples of Jesus. The number and the names of the disciples may vary but usually she is not presented alone. The only real exception seems to be the excerpt of the Great Questions of Mary whose real character and contents remains somewhat vague, however, since only part of the writing is available to us. Admittedly, in Man. Ps. II 187 a private encounter between the Risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene is described and in the Gospel of Mary it is presupposed, but in both cases the instruction received through these meetings is shared with all the disciples.

A further feature typical of Mary Magdalene texts is that in most of the texts the events portrayed are situated in the period after the resurrection. Several of the texts, in fact, represent the genre of the Gnostic post-Easter revelation dialogue (Sophia of Jesus Christ, Dialogue of the Savior, Gospel of Mary, First Apocalypse of James, Pistis Sophia) or a sort of appearance story (Man. Ps. II 187, Great Questions of Mary). Even one of the two exceptions, Gospel of Thomas, does not actually have its setting in the life of the historical Jesus but it is rather a "timeless" collection of Jesus' sayings. The only text which in this respect really differs from the others, is the Gospel of Philip, in which Mary Magdalene has a special role explicitly in the life of the historical Jesus. She is the only one of his disciples who already during his earthly life understands his real character and message.

Having stated the common features in these Gnostic pictures of Mary Magdalene, I shall summarize the various, often differing presentations found in the Gnostic writings analyzed in this study. This is done not only by paying attention to most central elements of the Mary Magdalene’s role in each writing, but also by considering how the description of Mary Magdalene is related to feminine gender language used by the authors and to the way the other disciples are depicted. Finally I present what my findings can say about the origins of Mary Magdalene traditions and the position of women among the Gnostics.

In the Gospel of Thomas Mary Magdalene is presented in logion 21 as a disciple who is in need of a deeper understanding of Jesus’ teaching in order to reach the level of a “masterless, Jesus-like” disciple in the manner of Thomas. In logion 114 another, probably later situation is reflected. The figure of Mary Magdalene is used to illustrate the debate about the role of women among Thomasine Christians. With the help of Jesus’ words the editor of the text tries to settle the dispute. The message of the text is that Mary Magdalene and thus all women of the community not only have the right to stay as members of the community, but that their role is equal to that of the male members.

In the Sophia of Jesus Christ Mary Magdalene together with four male disciples act as the main interlocutors of Jesus during a revelation dialogue and later on as the preachers of the new gospel of God. In the Dialogue of the Savior, which is a revelation dialogue as well, the situation is very similar. Along with Judas (Thomas) and Matthew, Mary Magdalene is imparted a special instruction. Clearly, both writings describe Mary as a Gnostic disciple, from whom, together with the other disciples mentioned by name, the traditions utilized in these books are claimed to derive.

There are two writings which clearly give Mary Magdalene the superior position among the followers of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mary she is the most beloved disciple. As in the Gospel of Philip there is no evidence that Jesus’ love for Mary would involve a sexual relationship. As an indication of Mary’s special status she receives a secret vision from the Risen One, which reveals how a soul after having departed from the body finds its way to the ultimate rest. On the whole, she betrays a far greater understanding of Jesus’ teaching than the other (male) disciples, including Peter.
Clearly, the author of the text wants to show that after the ascension of the Savior Mary Magdalene takes his role as comforter and instructor of the other disciples. In *Pistis Sophia I-III* the dominant role of Mary Magdalene among the disciples is also obvious. In the dialogue between the Risen Savior and the disciples, which the writing describes, she presents more questions and interpretations of Jesus’ words than the others altogether. Her preeminence is explicitly acknowledged by the Savior, who states that her “heart is more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven” than all her brothers. Together with John, she also receives the promise that in the eschatological kingdom they are superior to all the other disciples. The only dissonance in the highly praiseworthy description of Mary Magdalene is the fact that the proclamation of Jesus’ instruction after his ascension is not entrusted to her but to the male disciples. In *Pistis Sophia IV* Mary Magdalene is not as dominant as in the three first books of the work, although even there she is the most active interlocutor of Jesus. In that writing the disciples on the whole are given a lesser status and attention is mainly focused on Jesus whose function as the only revelator is emphasized.

In the *First Apocalypse of James* the role of Mary Magdalene is given less attention because she is only a subsidiary character in the writing. Yet the small window which the *First Apocalypse of James* opens into her life shows that together with some other women she has a significant role in her own context. Even in the text world of the *First Apocalypse of James* she becomes a reference person to whom the protagonist of the writing, James the Just, is advised to turn (40:22-26) as he seeks to understand how to preach the gospel.

The role Mary Magdalene has in the *Gospel of Philip* differs very much from what she has in all the other writings. As already noted above, she is first of all known as the favorite disciple of the historical Jesus, the companion who alone understands his real nature and teaching. Thus, Mary Magdalene is the paragon of apostleship whose spiritual maturity is reached by other disciples of Jesus only later. The companionship between Mary and Jesus has also a wider dimension. In Valentinian terms, Mary is also seen as Jesus’ syzygos, i.e., she forms a spiritual consortium with Jesus. Together they provide the prototype of the union between Christ and his Church which materializes when the pneumatic elect are united with their pleromatic counterparts. The relationship between Mary and Jesus is purely spiritual. The mention of Jesus kissing Mary has no sexual implications but it is to be understood as a metaphorical expression for conveying spiritual nourishment and power. Mary’s special role engenders envy among the male disciples. After the resurrection the situation changes, however, when the male apostles also gain better understanding and become transmitters of spiritual mysteries. As a matter of fact, despite the prominent position Mary has as the companion of Jesus she is not made the guarantor of the teaching transmitted in the *Gospel of Philip* but the task is entrusted to the collective apostolic body.

The *Great Questions of Mary* is in many respects an exceptional writing among the Gnostic Mary Magdalene texts. It is the only work which is libertine in its spirit. Its main focus is to demonstrate how the imprisonment of the soul in the body can be terminated by consuming the semen and the menstrual blood in which the human soul dwells. Unlike the ascetic texts it does not therefore forbid sexual acts, although they are not practiced for procreation but for production of semen. It is significant that even this libertine Gnostic tradition may find its roots in the person of Mary Magdalene, although she is also linked with ascetic streams of Christianity, such as the ones represented by the *Sophia of Jesus Christ, the Dialogue of the Savior,* and *Pistis Sophia IV.* It is especially interesting that *Pistis Sophia IV* gives Mary Magdalene a central role among Jesus’ disciples, although it strongly criticizes the very practice which the *Great Questions of Mary* claims to originate from the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. The explanation for this is that the author of *Pistis Sophia IV* did not obviously have any direct knowledge of the *Great Questions of Mary* or the Gnostic groups which attached the practice of eating bodily emissions to Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, the existence of the *Great Questions of Mary* and *Pistis Sophia IV* serves to prove how the person of Mary Magdalene elicited a wide response.

*Men. Ps. II 187* is a further elaboration of the appearance of the Risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene recorded in John 20:11-18. It reports how Mary, after having understood the irreality of Jesus’ death and after having recovered from her spiritual weakness caused by his death, is entrusted with the task of finding the
eleven lost disciples. The task given to her does not imply, however, that Mary would be superior to the eleven male disciples. The focus of the psalm is not on her position among the followers of Jesus but on the faithfulness with which she carries out the task given to her. In this way the psalm as well as the other texts of the Psalms of Heracleides where she appears seeks to present her as a paragon for Manichaean believers and missionaries.

It is conspicuous that despite the prominent role the Gnostic writings grant to Mary Magdalene many of them can use a language which devalues women. For example, in Gos. Thom. 114 Jesus does assure Mary and the other women of the community that they not only have a right to remain members of the community but that their role is equal to that of the male members. Yet the women are granted this position, only if they become “male.” The implication of the statement is that they have to become more spiritual and probably also celibate.

Admittedly, there is nothing wrong with demanding that the members of a religious community should be spiritual. The problem with the statement is, however, that it was made using such language from the contemporary patriarchal culture which connects male with spiritual, perfect, transcendent, and female with sensual, incomplete, mundane. Even though it is not often noticed and reflected in earlier Mary Magdalene studies a similar phenomenon is encountered in other Gnostic Mary Magdalene texts as well. In those cases the positive impact her figure as the prominent female disciple might have had on furthering a new ideology of women’s position in society and in religious life, was watered down by the use of such language which emphasizes women’s inferiority and subordination. For example, in the Sophia of Jesus Christ, where Mary Magdalene acts as one of the main interlocutors of Jesus during a revelation dialogue and later on as a preacher of the gospel of God, it is the masculine multitude (II/4 118,5) which is supposed to be the result of her preaching. It is paradoxical that it is in the reply to Mary Magdalene’s question that the Savior mentions this self-identification of the Gnostics.

Likewise, in the Dialogue of the Savior Mary Magdalene is the main spiritual authority together with Judas (Thomas) and Matthew. These three are said to have received a special revelation of Jesus after the resurrection. Obviously the community reading the writing believed it derived its message from these three. Still, the book referring to a woman as one of its authorities speaks about destroying the “works of womanhood,” in accordance with the dominant male gender constructions typical of Mediterranean society, when it alludes to sexual abstinence. These examples show how firmly fixed the dichotomy between “male” and “female” was in the language and cultural values of the contemporary society.

It is likely that in the case of the Sophia of Jesus Christ and the Dialogue of the Savior Mary Magdalene’s person hardly created any change in the attitudes towards women or their role in society and religious life. In neither case does the treatment of Mary Magdalene lead to any reflection about the position of women in general. Curiously, in the Dialogue of the Savior it is Mary Magdalene herself who with her question about the works of womanhood is made to undermine the positive impact which her role as a major interlocutor of Jesus might have had on advancing women’s status. Even in the Gospel of Mary, where Mary Magdalene is an unchallengable authority and the most beloved disciple of Jesus, salvation is described as “putting on the perfect human being (φυλάσσω)” Even though the word φυλάσσω (Gr. αυτοκρατόρος) does not have the same exclusive connotation as “male” in Gos. Thom. 114 it defines salvation in terms of male-oriented language.

Although the First Apocalypse of James too contains sections where feminine gender language is used pejoratively (41,15-19; 24,27-30), the way the female spiritual heroes, including Mary Magdalene, are brought into the text seems to alleviate the negative connotation attached to femaleness. To the great astonishment of James the Just women may through gnosis become strong and leave their powerlessness. Yet even in the Apocalypse of James femaleness describes the earthly existence with all its limitations, and even if it need not be fully left behind in the act of redemption it must be complemented with maleness.

The relationship between Mary and the other (primarily male) disciples is described in different ways in Gnostic writings. Unlike the impression one easily gets from earlier Mary Magdalene research (especially Pagels, Price, Haskins, Koivunen), Mary’s relations to the disciples are by no means loaded with conflict in all the Gnostic writings. In the Sophia of Jesus Christ and the Dialogue of the Savior neither controversy, nor any rivalry can be detected between Mary and the male disciples while they are en-
gaged in the dialogue with the Risen Jesus. On the contrary, together and without any contention they represent the whole body of Jesus' disciples. In the Manichaean Psalms Book, too, no traces of conflict between Mary Magdalene and the male disciples can be discerned. The First Apocalypse of James does indeed picture the twelve disciples in somewhat negative terms; they seem to have an insufficient conception of gnosis and faith. Yet even there no real controversy between them and Mary Magdalene is developed. Partly, this may be explained by the fact that she has a subservient role in this writing. Obviously the relationship between James the Just, who has good contact with Mary Magdalene, and the twelve disciples is rather tense. In the Gospel of Philip the male disciples do envy Mary Magdalene because of her privileged position as the companion of the Savior, but even their envy does not really lead to a conflict with her. Their dissatisfaction is more directed to Jesus. Besides, after the resurrection Mary Magdalene and the male disciples together seem to constitute the collective body of the apostles.

Nonetheless, there are three Gnostic writings which display a clear conflict between Mary Magdalene and the male disciples. Yet unlike earlier Mary Magdalene research has suggested, in each case the situation is viewed somewhat differently. Only in the Gospel of Mary does the usual interpretation of this conflict find support. The controversy between Mary Magdalene and Peter seems to reflect a disagreement between Gnostic and non-Gnostic, orthodox Christians over the position of women with regard to the question of spiritual authority. No doubt, the author of the writing sides with the Gnostics and thus defends women's claims for being allowed to take part in spiritual leadership. Although in Pistis Sophia I-III the controversy seems in the same way to center on Peter and Mary Magdalene, the situation appears to be different. The cause of the quarrel is probably not the position of women in general but the credibility of Mary Magdalene as a transmitter of authoritative traditions. In contrast to the Gospel of Mary, in Pistis Sophia I-III Peter does not seem to represent an orthodox interpretation of Christian faith but his ideas are as Gnostic as Mary's. So, the writing seems to reflect an inter-Gnostic controversy. In Gos. Thom. 114 the debate concerns the position of women, more precisely their right to stay among Thomasine Christians. Unless Peter's comment in logion 114 is a mere hyper-

bole which gives the writer or editor of the text a chance to express personal views of women, the two views found in the logion seem to represent two different models of asceticism, one wanting to keep the male and female ascetics apart and the other allowing them to stay together. The author of the logion supports the latter alternative.

The question of the nature and the origin of the Gnostic Mary Magdalene traditions is a difficult one. At least it appears likely, however, that despite some common elements which can be found in various Mary Magdalene writings no literary dependency between them can be established. When one looks for roots of the Mary Magdalene traditions two aspects are significant. First, we have the testimony of the canonical gospels that after his resurrection Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (John 20,14-18; Mark 16,9-11). This story has evidently made Mary Magdalene an attractive figure for a Gnostic myth-making process. The Johannine story has had direct influence at least on Man. Ps. II 187, more indirectly on the other writings as well. Second, Gos. Thom. 21, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Dialogue of the Savior provide evidence for an emergence of a tradition (perhaps in eastern Syria) which presents Mary Magdalene as a Gnostic disciple. It is worth noting that in its initial stage it is not connected with any kind of conflict with the male disciples, especially with Peter. Clearly, this is a matter of later development and makes impossible the attempts of Price and Kojiumen to see historical reminiscences in the conflict between Peter and Mary Magdalene. The idea of a special, permanent group of Gnostic disciples, which also includes Mary Magdalene, a Philip group, to use the term coined by Parrott, is not likely either. It simply does not correspond to the information in the texts, according to which Peter and Bartolomew, for example, are in some texts in the camp of the Gnostics, in others in the camp of the orthodox Christians. So, we are left with the idea of a prominent Gnostic disciple, Mary Magdalene, showing its first signs sometime at the beginning of the second century. But can we go beyond that? Does it reflect a historical figure who besides having been known to have experienced an appearance of Jesus had a leadership function among early Christians? It may, but there is no real evidence for it.

Finally, what do the Gnostic Mary Magdalene traditions say about the concrete situation of women among second and third
in the text world seem to have a clear correspondence in the socio-historical reality of women. Those texts are the Gospel of Mary and the Great Questions of Mary. The Gospel of Mary was at least partly written as a defence of the women wanting to take part in spiritual leadership but being prevented by those who regarded it as an illegitimate enterprise. This is shown by the concreteness of the controversy between Mary and Peter. It is not only the role of Mary as a transmitter of a visionary revelation which is at stake but the spiritual authority of women in general. With regard to the Great Questions of Mary it is not only the prominent position the writing gives to Mary Magdalene which suggests a strong female participation in the leadership of the Gnostic group which read that work. Moreover, the information Epiphanius offers of powerful women leaders within the group as well as the occurrence of several female names in the titles of the other writings used by the group speak for a significant influence women had in this libertine Gnostic group which claimed to derive its origin from an encounter between the Risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

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