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Mary Magdalene the Apostle: A Re-interpretation of Literary Traditions?¹

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abstract:

Maria Magdalena ist eine wichtige Person des entstehenden Christentums, die in vielen Evangelien vorkommt und dabei mitunter eindeutig als eine Apostelin, d.h. als Person mit Beauftragung und Lehrautorität, dargestellt wird. Ist die Vorstellung von der Apostelin Maria Magdalena eine alte Tradition, die sich leider nur in wenigen Zeugnissen erhalten hat, wie oftmals angenommen? In meinem Aufsatz untersuche ich die Darstellung von Maria Magdalena in verschiedenen Schriften, und zwar anhand der für das Apostelamt besonders relevanten Geschichten der Erscheinung des Auferstandenen. Dabei zeigt sich, dass Maria Magdalena in später entstandenen Schriften deutlicher Apostelin ist als in früheren. Der Befund lässt sich m.E. als eine Weiterentwicklung der im Matthäusevangelium erzählten Erscheinungsgeschichten erklären: Das Johannesevangelium, die Sophia Jesu Christi und das Mariaevangelium verstärken jeweils Marias apostolische Rolle, indem sie unterschiedliche Traditionen interpretieren und umgestalten. Im zweiten Jahrhundert wird Maria Magdalena als Apostelin angesehen. Aber anders als z.B. bei Thomas gehört die Anerkennung ihrer persönlichen Autorität als beauftragte Lehrende nicht zum frühesten erhaltenen Bestand der Traditionen über sie.

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Most early Christian gospels mention Mary Magdalene. She is always seen as a disciple of Jesus (in a broad sense, meaning a person accompanying him during his earthly ministry) and she is especially connected with his death and resurrection. Other early Christian writings, such as Acts or the Pauline epistles, do not name her at all. Feminist exegesis has long noticed the importance of Mary Magdalene in early Christianity. Many studies analyse the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the gospels and its historical basis, draw attention to the differences among the sources, and reconstruct early Christian developments.² The sources display not only a variety of opinions on Mary Magdalene, but point to a history of conflict as well.³ Traditions on Mary Magdalene visible in some sources might be diminished or suppressed in others.⁴

In my essay, I concentrate on one aspect of the picture of Mary Magdalene: whether she is regarded as an apostle. Several gospels see her as an apostle while others do not – and in some cases, it is rather difficult to decide on the interpretation. In which sources do we find apostolic tradition in terms of Mary Magdalene? What conclusions can be drawn about the age and origins and about the transmission and development of the tradition? In my opinion, the evidence points to a relatively late origin of the tradition and a mostly literary development. This does not mean that Mary Magdalene was not an important person in early Christianity. But perhaps she was not always regarded as an apostle. To substantiate this idea, I will examine the texts most likely to depict an apostolic Mary: those that portray her as commissioned by the risen Jesus. I will try to show the interrelations among the stories and draw conclusions about the apostolicity of Mary. But first of all, some thoughts are required on the word *apostle*.

1. What is an apostle?

Apostle is a difficult term that can be applied to different persons. What is meant by it can vary and does vary, even in New Testament writings. Paul has another concept of an apostle than Luke.⁵ Nevertheless, there is broad agreement on some vital points. An apostle is commissioned by God to teach and to preach and he or she probably was commissioned through an appearance of the risen Jesus.⁶ Teaching, commission and appearance – it looks rather easy to define an apostle. But there is an element of subjectivity present: a commission by the risen Lord is difficult to prove. The person himself or herself of course knows and can, therefore, claim – as Paul did – to be an apostle (1 Corinthians 9:1). But other people might not consent to this claim. Calling somebody an apostle implies an acceptance of the person's authority. If I regard Paul or James or Mary as apostles, I am saying that they are teaching in the name of God – and that their teaching is relevant to me.

Unluckily no letters written by Mary Magdalene have survived; there is no way to know whether she saw herself as an apostle. But when we examine the evidence of early Christian writings about her, we can decide whether she was regarded as an apostle in the first and second centuries. In which gospel is she shown as commissioned to teach and where is her authority accepted? This not only concerns the facts written about her, but also the attitude towards her person expressed in the text. For example, the gospel of Luke obviously does not regard her as a person with apostolic authority, although she is teaching what she learned from heavenly messengers.⁷ The facts Luke presents could be interpreted differently: Luke's attitude towards Mary can be observed by his arrangement of the facts in the narrative. In such a way, the gospels show us how Mary was seen.

2. The writings

a) The gospel of Mary

The gospel of Mary is certainly a most important example of Mary pictured with apostolic authority.⁸ Mary is teaching. Her teaching consists of words Jesus told her, although she is not explicitly commissioned to pass them on, at least as far as the preserved text shows. Moreover, her teaching is connected to some kind of vision or appearance – Mary has seen the Lord. She herself stresses the point by saying: I have seen the Lord (Gospel of Mary, BG p.10,10f). At the end of the gospel, the relevance of her teaching is heatedly discussed and her personal authority challenged. The gospel very clearly advocates Mary's position. Nevertheless, it shows that other opinions are also possible: Peter and Andrew do not accept Mary's claim to speak words of Jesus.⁹ Those writing and reading the gospel of Mary have to admit that there is no general consensus on Mary's position. But by presenting the teaching of Mary and proving her direct connection to Jesus the gospel supports Mary's authority.¹⁰

b) The Sophia of Jesus Christ

Another example of an apostolic Mary can be found in the Sophia of Jesus Christ. This gospel begins with an appearance of the risen Jesus to twelve male and seven female disciples. Jesus then informs them about many heavenly mysteries and answers their questions; in the end they start to preach what they have learned. Mary as well as four male disciples are named as posing questions. In one instance, the whole group is called "holy apostles" (BG p.114,12f; NHC III p.112,19f). As far as I know, it is the only place where the term apostle is used for Mary – she is certainly part of the group and commissioned to teach.¹¹

Unlike the gospel of Mary, the Sophia of Jesus Christ does not place Mary above the other disciples. She is not the only one to receive special teaching, but belongs to the group that is entrusted with it. The Christians' writing and reading the Sophia of Jesus Christ regard her as commissioned by Jesus himself and rely on her contact to Jesus.¹²

c) The gospel of John

In the gospel of John the case is less obvious. In my opinion, the text John 20:14-18 gives clues that point to an apostolic interpretation.¹³ Mary meets the risen Jesus in the garden near the tomb and he sends her to tell the other disciples about his ascent to God. Jesus is going to God, to his father – and for the first time in the gospel of John, God is called the father of the disciples. The message Mary receives includes information on the new status of Jesus (his ascent to God), as well as on the disciples' new relationship

to God. What she has to tell is, therefore, of lasting importance.¹⁴ When Jesus later appears to the group of disciples (the group is not restricted to the eleven disciples; Mary might well be included)¹⁵, he sends them and gives them the spirit. Mary's message about Jesus' ascent and the new relationship to God can be seen as the basis for the commissioning of the whole group. In such a way, both stories are closely connected and complement one another.¹⁶ Although the appearance of Jesus to Mary displays many special features, in general its character is similar to the group-appearance (It is important to note this, because the case is different in the gospel of Matthew).¹⁷

In the gospel of John, Mary Magdalene has an encounter with the risen Jesus and she is entrusted with an important message. Moreover, Mary herself gives a summary of her experience when she tells the other disciples: I have seen the Lord (20:18). For Paul, the same words comprise a claim to apostolic authority (1 Corinthians 9:1). In the gospel of Mary, they might have similar implications. The gospel of John certainly shows that the appearance of Jesus has consequences for the personal importance and authority of Mary. She has a message which makes her a messenger – an apostle.

d) The gospel of Matthew

The gospel of Matthew is the earliest source that narrates an appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene – to Mary Magdalene and another Mary to be exact (Matthew 28:9-10). Basically, it is the same story as in the gospel of John: the Marys visit the tomb of Jesus, they meet an angel and later Jesus himself who sends them to the other disciples. But unlike John, Matthew does not portray Mary with apostolic traits. Although attributing an important and positive role to the Marys he does not see them as apostles.¹⁸ The most important reason for this interpretation is the striking difference between the two appearances narrated by Matthew: at the end of his gospel (Matthew 28:16-20), the eleven (male) disciples meet Jesus in Galilee and he sends them out into the whole world to preach, baptize etc. – the clearest apostolic commissioning that can be imagined. The eleven disciples are certainly regarded as apostles in Matthew. On the other hand, the two women who meet Jesus on the way from the tomb, get a much more concrete and limited assignment. Jesus tells them to send the other disciples to Galilee and to announce that they will see him there. The resurrection is not explicitly mentioned, but probably included in the message. This is an important message, but they only have to deliver it once. There is no indication that they went on preaching in the name of God.¹⁹ Not even their telling to the disciples is narrated, although the story of the appearance in Galilee presupposes that the women delivered the message effectively.

As in John, the appearances to the women and to the group of disciples in Matthew are closely connected. But they are neither similar in character nor complementing each other. Instead, the appearance to the women prepares for the climax at the end of the gospel. Apart from this preparatory function, the women are concerned with the resurrection of Jesus – not with their own role, preaching and teaching. They do not gain personal authority despite the importance of what they learn from meeting Jesus.

3. The development of traditions

If we consider the evidence of the sources, the apostolic authority of Mary Magdalene seems to grow; it is more pronounced in the second than in the first century.

Admittedly, there are several writings that do not mention Mary at all, and others that only give her a marginal role. Nevertheless, in those writings that narrate an appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary, there is a tendency to enlarge her position. At the beginning of and during the second century, several Christians regarded Mary as an apostle. The *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *gospel of Mary* (both probably written in the first half or in the middle of the second century) give the clearest portrayal of an apostolic Mary Magdalene. In the *gospel of John* (written around the turn of the century), such a picture is less obvious but still noticeable, while in *Matthew* (second half of the first century) Mary is not an apostle.

These chronological observations are difficult to reconcile with a strong tradition of an apostolic Mary at the beginning of the tradition. They rather point to a gradual development. In my opinion, the different stories could well be seen as different interpretations of the stories the *gospel of Matthew* tells. They all seem to be related to *Matthew*, although in different ways.

The *Sophia of Jesus Christ* certainly presupposes the *gospel of Matthew*, and probably the *gospel of John* as well.²⁰ This writing starts with an appearance of the risen Jesus that is strongly reminiscent of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in *Matthew*: “After he rose from the dead, when his twelve disciples and seven women, who were his disciples, went up to Galilee onto the mountain called ‘Divination and Joy’ and were accordingly perplexed about ..., then the saviour appeared to them, not in his previous form but ...” (BG p.77,9-78,14).²¹ The teaching Jesus gives to his disciples then forms the main part of the writing. In the end, he disappears and the disciples go and preach the *gospel*. Mary is explicitly named as one of the group of disciples. In this case, the great commissioning scene of *Matthew’s gospel* is developed to include women. Its

apostolic character is preserved, but not only the male disciples are regarded as apostles, female disciples are part of the group as well, and Mary is the most prominent among them.²²

The gospel of John chooses a different approach to grant Mary's apostolic authority: the story of her appearance is given much more prominence and its apostolic character is underlined. Both writings achieve the same result: Mary is an apostle. But they use different traditions to make this point. While the Sophia of Jesus Christ works with the group appearance of Matthew, the gospel of John develops an appearance to Mary. The Sophia of Jesus Christ quite clearly changes an existing tradition by including the women. The gospel of John might know the gospel of Matthew and its story of an appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, or it might have access to the tradition Matthew uses.²³ The comparison suggests an enhancement of the importance of Mary Magdalene in her appearance story in the gospel of John.

In both writings, rather small changes result in a most important difference: Mary's apostolic authority. In Matthew's commissioning scene, the group of disciples already has a representative character. The whole story looks more like a general summary of the mission of the church than like a historical report. It is, therefore, a small step to enlarge the group and have the church represented by female as well as by male disciples in the Sophia of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the gospel of John knows about an encounter of Mary with the risen Jesus, and it knows as well that apostolic authority might be based on an appearance. In consequence, the story of Jesus appearing to Mary can be retold, emphasizing the apostolic character. The gospel of John probably intends to shift some authority from Peter to Mary.²⁴

Both gospels prove that some early Christians were interested in a "feminist" re-interpretation of older traditions. I myself find this really remarkable. Many traditions about early Christian women were suppressed and might well be lost completely, but others were not only preserved but actually enhanced.

So far, I have left aside the gospel of Mary. I rather tend to read most of the gospel as a re-interpretation and enlargement of John's story of Mary. Mary has seen the Lord, he entrusts her with teachings nobody else has heard. This teachings concern the ascent to God, and Mary is willing to share her knowledge.²⁵ Certainly, the gospel of Mary emphasizes and defends her apostolic authority, so it fits very well into my picture of early Christians' interested in putting Mary to the fore as an apostle. If the gospel of

Mary really develops the gospel of John, it increases the apostolic character of the story and underlines the importance of Mary's teaching. (And of course it adapts the content of the teaching to its own interests.) While the gospel of John strengthens Mary's authority as an apostle and places her parallel to the group, the gospel of Mary goes even further and puts her above everybody else. Tendencies that can be observed comparing John to Matthew continue on into the gospel of Mary. That, I think, is very plausible.

There is one more example of an enlargement of Mary's apostolic authority. The Dialogue of the Saviour does not narrate an appearance of Jesus, but in this writing Jesus entrusts his teaching to Mary, Judas (Thomas) and Matthew. Probably based on the gospel of Thomas, the Dialogue of the Saviour develops her role as disciple receiving important instructions. Although she is not teaching, the writing implies that the readers depend on her knowledge.

4. Traditions about Mary and traditions about Thomas

I hope I have so far shown that several writings emphasize the apostolic authority of Mary and that they even strengthen it, in comparison with earlier sources. This can be explained as a literary development of related stories. When talking about literary development, I do not have a person in mind who sits in his or her study reading one gospel and writing a new one. I rather imagine groups of people hearing, for example, the gospel of Matthew and telling and re-telling the stories until they are written down again.²⁶ Some of the development might be oral, although it might happen at different places in different ways. There is no need for a continuous oral tradition with Mary herself at the beginning. Once gospels are written, they can be starting points for new developments.

But what can be said about traditions preceding the gospels and possibly influencing even later gospels? In my opinion, it is unlikely that Mary was seen as an apostle in these early traditions. I will try to substantiate this idea by comparing the traditions about Mary with those relating to Thomas.

The writings discussed so far narrate an appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary that might be interpreted as apostolic. Others give different stories though. The main characteristic of Mary found in every text about her is that she is a disciple of Jesus. Wherever Mary is mentioned, she is accompanying Jesus during his earthly ministry.

The synoptic gospels, the gospel of Thomas, of Peter etc. all picture her as a disciple. Moreover, in the gospels that include a passion narrative, Mary is connected to the death and, even more important, to the resurrection of Jesus. Mary is a disciple and concerned with the resurrection of Jesus – both points are certainly part of the earliest tradition about her. On the other hand, neither her personal authority, nor her role as a teacher are attested to, either widely or at an early date.

Thomas, like Mary, plays an important role in some writings, whilst being ignored in most others. The most important writings of the Thomas tradition are the gospel of Thomas, the book of Thomas, the Acts of Thomas and the Dialogue of the Saviour (here Thomas is called Judas). The gospel of Thomas is the earliest of these texts and all the others probably use it, although they have little else in common.²⁷ In all these writings, Thomas has an apostolic role. He is entrusted with teaching by Jesus and sent to pass it on, although in most cases there is no appearance of the risen Jesus. Especially in the gospel of Thomas, he is not only one apostle among others, but surpasses them all. His intimacy with Jesus and the authority resulting from it are presupposed by all the writings and are, therefore, probably part of the earliest tradition about Thomas. While Mary's authority seems to increase in later writings, in parts of the Thomas tradition a different tendency can be observed: at least the Dialogue of the Saviour places Thomas on an equal footing with Mary and Matthew and does not give him a special role. The position of Thomas with regard to the other disciples is discussed in the book of Thomas as well.²⁸

In the Thomas tradition, Thomas is always seen in an apostolic role, already prominent in the gospel of Thomas, the earliest written document preserved. His position is discussed and modified, yet it is always present. In writings concerned with Mary, her role as a disciple and the resurrection of Jesus are widely attested to. An apostolic role can be found in one strand of the tradition, although not in others. Furthermore, it is developing; it is not presupposed from the beginning.

5. Conclusion

We still do not know whether Mary Magdalene regarded herself as an apostle and how the earliest (pre-gospel) Christians in general or specific groups saw her. Nevertheless, we do know that several decades after the events, some people were definitely interested in Mary: they wrote about her, interpreting her meeting with the risen Jesus as an apostolic commissioning and regarding her teaching as most relevant. For once,

traditions about an important woman are not suppressed but enhanced. To me, this is a most encouraging thought!

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¹ Paper read at the SBL Annual Meeting 2006, Christian Apocrypha Section, panel "Mary Magdalene and Apostolic Authority".

² Recent major studies are for example written by Brock, de Boer, Hearon, Mohri, Petersen, and Schaberg. Further works are listed by Brock, Mary, 11-12.

³ Brock, Mary, 173.175; Hearon, Mary, 194.

⁴ de Boer, Gospel, 197-198.

⁵ For example, in Acts 1:21-22 an apostle is required to be male and one of the disciples accompanying Jesus from his baptism till his ascension. For Paul, neither is necessary: he himself never met Jesus during his earthly ministry and he sees Junia as an apostle (Romans 16:7). For details of the respective concepts see Brock, Mary, 149-152.

⁶ Brock, Mary, 6-9.

⁷ Brock, Mary, 34-36; de Boer, Gospel, 153.

⁸ King, Gospel, passim; Mohri, Maria, 283-284.

⁹ de Boer, Gospel, 205-206.

¹⁰ de Boer, Gospel, 99-100.

¹¹ King, Gospel, 144.

¹² Hartenstein, Lehre, 262-265.

¹³ So also King, Gospel, 141; de Boer, Gospel, 178.192-193; Brock, Mary, 56-60. On different possible readings of John 20 see Schaberg, Resurrection, 327-339.

¹⁴ de Boer, Gospel, 176

¹⁵ Hearon, Mary, 161-162. See for the question if Mary Magdalene was the Disciple Jesus Loved: de Boer, Mary Magdalene. http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/00_1/inhalt_e.htm.

¹⁶ Ruschmann, Maria, 223-224.

¹⁷ Mohri, Maria, 146.

¹⁸ Hearon, Mary, 119.

¹⁹ So also de Boer, Gospel, 137; Mohri, Maria, 69. Brock (Mary, 65), on the other hand, lays stress on the fact that the women are commissioned at all while disregarding the limitations of their task.

²⁰ Hartenstein, Lehre, 57-59.

²¹ Coptic text Parrott, Eugnostos, 37-39, my translation

²² Hartenstein, Lehre, 326.

²³ A possible common tradition of Matthew and John is difficult to reconstruct but in my opinion probably similar to Matthew. Schaberg (Resurrection, 339-344) though assumes a tradition that gave Mary Magdalene even more importance than John behind the stories of Matthew and John.

²⁴ Hartenstein, Charakterisierung, 135-136.

²⁵ Petersen, Werke, 153-154; Hartenstein, Lehre, 157-158.

²⁶ Hearon, Mary, 11-12.

²⁷ Hartenstein, Charakterisierung, 215.

²⁸ Even the gospel of John can be read as placing Thomas at the same level as the other disciples, Hartenstein, Charakterisierung, 243-246.

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