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*The Earliest Magdalene:  
Varied Portrayals in Early Gospel Narratives\**

Edmondo Lupieri

**Introduction**

In the early writings produced by the followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene is connected with key events in the narrative regarding Jesus: his death on the cross, his burial, and his resurrection. At first sight, her figure seems to be growing in importance through time. Her name and figure, indeed, are completely absent from the oldest extant texts written by a follower of Jesus, the authentic letters of Paul.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly striking, since 1 Cor 15:5-8 contains the earliest known series of witnesses to the resurrection, but only men are named specifically.<sup>2</sup>

**1. Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Mark**

The Gospel of Mark is the oldest known text in which Mary Magdalene appears.<sup>3</sup> There, towards the end of the book, she is mentioned three times altogether,<sup>4</sup> always with another Mary

\*All translations are the author's. The Greek text of the New Testament is from Eberhard Nestle et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon seems to parallel the minimal importance of the mother of Jesus in Paul's letters. He mentions her only once and indirectly, when stressing that Jesus was born "of a woman" and "under the Law" (Gal 4:4). Besides using her existence to reaffirm the humanity (and Jewishness) of Jesus (for a similar use of a similar expression to describe the humanity of John the Baptist, see Luke 7:28 / Matt 11:11), Paul does not seem to care about who that "woman" was. This does not mean that Paul is particularly uninterested in Mary Magdalene or in Jesus' mother, but that generally in his letters Paul does not seem to be interested in any detail regarding the earthly life of Jesus, nor in the persons who were around him when he was in his human flesh (see further n. 10).

<sup>2</sup> Written in the mid-fifties C.E., this letter antedates the Gospels by at least a couple of decades. This is the famous passage: "(I handed over to you... what I also received)... that he [the resurrected Lord] was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve; and then he was seen by about five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still around, while some went to rest; and then he was seen by James and then by all the apostles; and last of all, as if (I were) an aborted child, he was seen by me too." Not only are there no women explicitly in the picture, but no temporal frame is given (certainly Paul says he was the last one to see the Lord; possibly, if we believe Acts, years after the crucifixion). Acts 13:31, though, has Paul explain that the resurrected Lord "was seen for many days by those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem." The fact that women are not mentioned does not mean that they were not there if their presence was deemed "normal"; in our texts women are mentioned only in exceptional cases, usually when they create some problem or their presence is not expected. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 45. For the problems related to an "exegesis of silence," see Carla Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women who Followed Jesus*, trans. Paul Burns (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 1994; orig.: Naples: M. D'Auria, 1991), 19-28.

<sup>3</sup> I accept the now traditional chronology of the Gospels. Mark was reworked over the years, but the redaction which basically corresponds to the text we have (ending abruptly at Mark 16:8) must have been completed in chronological proximity to the fall of Jerusalem (70 C.E.). Luke and Matthew would have been composed roughly in the 80s or 90s C.E.; the Gospel of John was also rewritten several times and its final redaction would have taken place at the turn of the century.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars take radical positions and believe her figure was invented by Mark; see Dennis R. MacDonald [*sic*: the author is Dennis R. McDonald], "ΥΠΗΡΧΕ Η ΜΑΡΙΑ ΜΑΓΔΑΛΗΝΗ ΠΙΠΙΝ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΙΝΟΗΣΕΙ Ο ΜΑΡΚΟΣ" in *Δελτίο Βιβλικόν Μελετόν* 23 (2005): 97-113. It is probably true that Mary Magdalene does not appear in any pre-synoptic tradition independent from Mark, since almost everything the other Gospels say about her can be considered a redactional expansion and/or correction of the Markan narrative (but see later our commentary on Luke 8:2).

and twice also with other women.<sup>5</sup> In Mark 15:40-47, they all witness (“from a distance”) the crucifixion and death of Jesus (and possibly the faith of the centurion);<sup>6</sup> in 15:47, together with the other Mary, she observes his burial;<sup>7</sup> in 16:1-8, together with Mary and another woman, she would like to anoint the body of Jesus, but fails. Apparently she did not know that Jesus had already been anointed<sup>8</sup> nor could she imagine he was resurrected. The three women see the empty tomb, and a “young man sitting . . . in a long white garment,” probably an angelic figure,<sup>9</sup> and then they receive from him the mandate to go and tell the disciples to go to Galilee to see the resurrected Lord. They do not obey, though, and run away without doing or saying anything, since they were too afraid. At this point in the narrative, in its anti-climactic ending, Mary Magdalene’s failure seems to be complete. Especially if the young man was thought to be an

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<sup>5</sup> The four Gospels offer different versions of the narrative regarding which women were present at the crucifixion of Jesus, during the burial, at the empty tomb and with him resurrected. In summary: Mark 15:40-41 tells that, from a distance, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the little and Joses, Salome and other women (divided into two groups; see n. 6) were watching. According to the text of some manuscripts, at Mark 15:40f., the mother (?) of James is a different person from the mother of Joses, also because Mark tells at 15:47 that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Joses look at where Jesus was buried, while at 16:1 he says that Mary Magdalene, Mary of James (as if she were a different Mary) and Salome go to anoint Jesus’ body. Luke has no names of the women who watch from the distance at the crucifixion (23:49), but has already listed their names at 8:2: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Susanna and many others. Later (at 24:10), when he lists the names of the women who found the empty tomb, he mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary of James and “the other ones.” Matt 27:55 has Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses (no doubt in the manuscripts of Matthew), and the (unnamed) mother of the sons of Zebedee (who reappears on the scene after her not so great behavior of 20:20-23) watch the crucifixion from a distance with many other women. In the following narrative Matthew brings to the scene only and always Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (see esp. 27:61 and 28:1). In John 19:25-27 we find at the cross of Jesus his mother, the sister of his mother, (called) Mary (wife?) of Clopas, Mary Magdalene (and the male disciple whom Jesus loved). I think it more probable that Mary of Clopas *is* the sister of the unnamed mother (since I would expect an “and” before her name, as in the list of male disciples in John 21:2), but it is not impossible to think that John believes there were four women at the cross, and not only three. In any case, in the following narrative, the only woman on the scene is Mary Magdalene.

<sup>6</sup> In this first appearance of Mary Magdalene in the text, Mark tells us that she was part of a group of women who “had followed him [Jesus] when he was in Galilee and had ministered to him” (15:41). This makes the Magdalene one of the earliest followers of Jesus, from the beginning of his activity. These women are distinguished from the “many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.” Apparently, these other “many women” had started following Jesus after the first group and were not coming from Galilee, according to Mark. Nowhere else in the Gospel, though, does Mark explicitly mention their presence (see above, n. 2).

<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ burial was performed by Joseph of Arimathea, an “illustrious member of the Sanhedrin who was awaiting the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). Does the sentence according to which he was “awaiting the kingdom of God” mean that he was an early follower of Jesus (Mark 1:15), or is it something that could be said of any observant Jew? Is his discipleship implied in the fact that Mark says that he “dared” to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus? No further reason is given why this “illustrious member of the Sanhedrin” should take care of the body of a man unanimously condemned by that same Sanhedrin and therefore executed by the Romans (see 14:55 and 15:1; was Joseph there?). Some contemporary scholars think that Joseph had officially been given this task by the Sanhedrin in order to obey the Law of Moses, and that Mark and early believers apologetically transformed his person and function (Deut 21:22-3; e.g., Gerd Lüdemann and Alf Özen, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, trans. John Bowden [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995], 17-24). In any case, it seems evident that no brothers, parents, or relatives of Jesus are there to accomplish what should be their primary duty for a deceased member of their family (Mark 15:45-46; for the strong analogies with the “body” of John the Baptist and its burial, see Mark 6:29).

<sup>8</sup> According to Mark 14:3-9 Jesus had already been anointed “on his head” by an anonymous woman, two days before the crucifixion, “in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper”; in Jesus’ words: “She anointed my body beforehand for burial” (14:8).

<sup>9</sup> See further footnote 18, regarding Luke 24:23. The possible literary connection with the “young man” who “ran away naked” in Mark 14:51-52 makes the whole narrative quite puzzling.

angel by the author, then it is particularly negative that the women do not obey his commission. In biblical narratives, indeed, not many women see angels, but they usually try to do what they are told.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke

In the Gospel of Luke Mary Magdalene and the other women have a more positive function in the narrative, but not much. They are mentioned as early as 8:2-3, where the fact that women did follow Jesus already in Galilee is explained on the basis of their gratefulness for having been cured by him.<sup>11</sup> Mary Magdalene, in particular, had seven demons cast out of her – a detail which is not exactly a compliment.<sup>12</sup> She is probably included (but not one who is

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<sup>10</sup> It looks like Mark wants to stress such negative behavior, even at some risk to his own reliability: if the women did not say anything to anyone, how did *he* know about the event? It is worth mentioning, though, that in this Gospel (if we do not take into consideration the so-called “Longer Ending” of 16:9-20, for which see in this volume the contribution by Rogers) we can find failure and misunderstanding in practically every witness of the earthly Jesus, as if they were incapable of grasping who Jesus really was. This is true not only of the women at the tomb, but also of all the male disciples (who abandon Jesus to his solitary death), of all the people Jesus heals (who do not follow him afterwards), and even of his own mother and brothers, who are able to think he went crazy (3:21), but not to believe. In this Gospel, a solid, durable faith does not seem to be grounded on direct contact with the “historical Jesus.” The devaluation of this kind of direct contact, then, may be understood in the frame of Pauline propaganda, interested in stressing the importance of a contact with the resurrected Lord. See now on this subject Clare K. Rothschild, “‘Have I Not Seen Jesus Our Lord?!’ (1 Cor 9:1c): Faithlessness of Eyewitnesses in the Gospels of Mark and Paul,” in *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 31/1 (2014), 29-51. If all this is true, we must recognize that “eye-witnessing” the earthly Jesus (the importance of which was quite recently stressed by scholarship; see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006]) may not have been considered a key element for true faith, at least in part of the early Pauline tradition (and possibly against Acts 1:21-22).

<sup>11</sup> It looks like this Gospel feels the need to somehow justify their (otherwise ignored) presence, as if it could have been detrimental. Besides the Magdalene, two other women are named by Luke: “Joanna, the wife of Chouza, a steward of Herod, and Susanna.” While these two names are mentioned only by Luke and possibly derive from a non-Markan tradition, all the other details not found in Mark may have been added by Luke to explain or clarify Mark 15:41. Particularly, Luke explains the Markan idea of their “ministry to him” (Jesus, with a singular pronoun in Mark 15:41) as a financial support for the whole group of wandering men (a plural pronoun in the best manuscripts of Luke 9:3; see also the following note). Finally, their silent presence with Jesus at an early date in Galilee (before 9:22!) allows Luke to build his scene of the women at the empty tomb (Luke 24:7; see further n. 15).

<sup>12</sup> Luke is the only evangelist to stress this detail, which will be reproduced in the Longer Ending of Mark (Mark 16:9). The fact may be interpreted as the result of Luke’s desire to downplay the figure and the role of the Magdalene. In this case, it may be connected to another narrative element we find only in Luke: he is the only evangelist who does not report any commission by the two extraordinary figures the women meet at the empty tomb. As we will see, the women decide on their own to go tell the disciples (the men and the other women?) what they have seen, and even if they report everything correctly, their report is not believed until Jesus begins appearing to male disciples (and women are not in the picture any more). Since in Luke women are mentioned more frequently and positively, at times in scenes that only Luke describes (like in the Infancy narrative or when two sisters, Martha and Mary, apparently still in Galilee, welcome Jesus into their house, with no male figure around them), the possible downplaying of Mary Magdalene might be understood in the frame of early struggles about female leadership in the various groups of followers of Jesus, as the Pauline criticism of female prophecy may indicate (some feminist scholars consider that of Luke/Acts a false friendship towards women: Jane Schaberg, “Luke,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition*, ed., Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 363-380; Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Luke*. Vol. 3 of *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine [New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002]; Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, eds., *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*. Vol. 9 of *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*, ed., Amy-Jill Levine [New York: T&T Clark, 2004]). One must be cautious when making an argument from silence (see above, n. 2), but the “seven demons” could be thought to be a devilish counterpart of the “seven spirits” we find in

mentioned by name) among the women from Galilee who observe, together with Jesus' "acquaintances" (23:49), the crucifixion and later the burial.<sup>13</sup> They prepare "spices and ointments," rest on the Sabbath "according to the commandment" and then, the morning after, they go to anoint Jesus' body (23:55-24:1).<sup>14</sup> Instead, they find the empty tomb, and talk to "two men" standing "in shining garments" who remind them of Jesus' prophecy when they were all in Galilee, regarding his crucifixion, death and resurrection on the third day (24:4-7).<sup>15</sup> While later in the chapter the male disciples in two separate events are personally instructed by the resurrected Jesus so that they, thanks to the correct interpretation of the Scripture, understand the need for Jesus as "the Christ" to die and be resurrected (24:26 and 24:46), the women (who are not expected to know the Scripture) through angelic revelation are able to "remember" (and understand) the words of Jesus regarding the death and suffering of "the Son of Man" (for which see 9:22. [31.] 44 and 18:31-34). As a consequence, the women go "announce everything to the Eleven and the others," of their own initiative (24:8-9). Here Luke mentions the names of three of them, but he also states that the male disciples did not believe the women's report.<sup>16</sup> In spite of his unbelief, Peter runs to the tomb, sees that it is empty, and remains amazed (vv. 10-12).

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early Christian prophetic/apocalyptic literature, as the legitimate source of spiritual knowledge (Rev 1:4 etc.). If this connection has any meaning, the possible Lucan slander would imply that Mary Magdalene had a past connection with false prophetic experiences, like the slave girl exorcised by Paul in Acts 16:16-18. On his side, Matthew seems to downplay at least some female figures mostly as a way to discredit their sons, whose memory may have been particularly authoritative among groups of followers of Jesus antagonistic to his own (I suppose this happens with Mary the mother and with the mother of the sons of Zebedee, while the real criticism may be directed against the brothers of Jesus and against John and his brother).

<sup>13</sup> In this Gospel, Joseph of Arimathaea becomes a "good and just" man, a member of the Sanhedrin who "had not consented to the counsel and deed of them" (23:50-51).

<sup>14</sup> In the Gospel of Luke (7:36-50), Jesus gets only his feet anointed in the house of a Simon, who is a Pharisee, by an anonymous woman who is "a sinner in that city." The scene takes place apparently in Galilee and long before the Passion narrative. The anointing of Jesus' feet is not related to the burial, nor does it seem that that particular sinful woman joins the group of the followers of Jesus in Galilee. That a "sinning woman" can only anoint Jesus' feet (apart from the fact that he was lying down in a *triclinium*, according to Roman habits, and the feet were more easily reachable for an incoming person) is possibly due to a reflection on Psalm 140:5, according to the Greek text of the LXX: "Let not the oil of the sinner anoint my head" (the Hebrew is very different and, if the connection is real, the narrative can scarcely have originated in a Semitic context). This scene in Luke precedes immediately the first mentioning of Mary Magdalene at 8:2-3. This fact will later facilitate the fusion of the two women in popular and patristic reflections, but in Luke nothing connects the "sinning woman" to the Magdalene. In this way, there is no narrative difficulty and it is not illogical (from a human and Jewish perspective) for Mary Magdalene and the other women to want to anoint the body of Jesus after his death.

<sup>15</sup> Although Galilee is mentioned by the two men, there is no commission to go to Galilee, since in Luke and in Acts the disciples remain in Jerusalem after the ascension, until Pentecost and afterward, and – contrary to Matthew and John – nobody goes to Galilee anymore. Even if Acts 9:31 knows that "the church" is healthy and "in peace" also in Galilee, the beginning of the Gospel as well as the beginning of the Church is in Jerusalem (with both Luke and Acts focusing on the pre-70 Temple). From there and for different reasons or through different human agents, the message spreads to the whole world and reaches Rome, its new center. No function is left for Galilee. For the problems related to this, see now Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, "After Jesus' Death: At the Origin of the Differentiation between the Groups of Jesus Followers" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL, Baltimore, MD, 24 November, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> In this Gospel the only other woman who sees an angel and talks with him is Mary, the mother of Jesus. In her case, though, it is the author who explicitly says that the figure is an angel (actually Gabriel). Reporting of seeing angels, or even seeing angels, *per se* does not seem to be a guarantee of reliability for women's words, at least here and according to Acts 12:15, where the fact is explicitly connected to being "out of mind."

Afterwards Jesus appears to two men<sup>17</sup> on the way to Emmaus. They know about the women who saw “some angels,”<sup>18</sup> but also that the women’s report had left the people quite perplexed (24:22-24). When they run back to Jerusalem to join the other disciples (who seem to be all together in one specific place), they hear that (in the meantime) Jesus has already appeared to Peter (alone) and, while they are there, Jesus himself comes, greets them, invites them to touch him and finally eats with them all (24:33-42). No women are mentioned nor seem to be present.<sup>19</sup>

To sum up, among the earliest extant texts, the Pauline epistles, Mark and Luke do not record Mary Magdalene or the women as seeing the resurrected Lord. While Paul is fully silent about their existence and role, Mark and Luke state that they see either a “young boy” or “two men,” and witness the empty tomb. Mark also reports that they were commissioned by the “young boy” to relate the news of the resurrection and the invitation to go to Galilee to see the resurrected Jesus, but they fail to do so. Luke, instead, tells that they decide, with no commission, but on their own, to announce what they had seen and heard, and while he stresses that they are not believed (at least in the beginning) he also recognizes that their report is correct and confirmed by male disciples. He seems ready to recognize that women also can see angels, but the confirmation of men, who see the Lord, is still needed.

### 3. Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Matthew

The first text that says that Mary Magdalene saw the resurrected Lord is the Gospel of Matthew. Also in this Gospel, as in the Gospel of Mark, Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and other women look from a distance at the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and then Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sit by the tomb watching his burial by Joseph of Arimathaea (Matt 27:55-61).<sup>20</sup> At the beginning of the day after Sabbath (possibly still at night),<sup>21</sup> Mary

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<sup>17</sup> Luke says “two of them” (24:13), meaning that they are disciples, but not among the Eleven. A few lines later he says that the name of one of them was Cleopas (24:18), creating a quasi-homonymy with the man called Clopas in John 19:25, the husband of another Mary. Clopas and Cleopas will be usually considered one and the same person in patristic literature as well as in the hagiographic and apocryphal developments of the narrative.

<sup>18</sup> Therefore the two men of the vision are explained as angels by the women and such explanation seems to be accepted among the followers of Jesus. In apocalyptic texts and in vision narratives it is quite normal that figures appearing to be “men” are actually explained to be angels. For a biblical example of “men” as “angels,” see the guests of Abraham and Lot in Gen 18-19; for the white dresses of angels (a phenomenon less common than expected in early texts), besides our Gospel parallel passages, see Acts 1:10 and (probably) Rev 19:14.

<sup>19</sup> “Some women” do appear, together with Mary the mother and the brothers of Jesus, at the beginning of Acts, but after the ascension of Jesus (1:14), and their presence can be supposed in the following scenes (including Pentecost), but they are not explicitly mentioned any more. The figure of Mary the mother, though, is much more important in Luke and also in Acts than in Matthew or Mark. As it is well known, she is a key character in the Lukan infancy narrative (while Joseph is quite secondary, at least if compared with his figure in the Matthean version of the story). Later, although not appearing in the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus, her simple mention together with Jesus’ brothers in Acts 1:14 shows her importance in the reconstruction of early church history. The author of Acts (be he the same of the Gospel or not) is interested in depicting a smooth picture of the first phases of what we now call Christianity, for which the community in Jerusalem is his ideal model. The presence of Mary and the brothers on one side signifies that the different groups of early followers are all together from the beginning, with no apparent contrasts, on the other side it sounds like a guarantee that the authority implied in a familial relationship with the founder of the group continues naturally in the community of Jerusalem. Finally, the recipient of the text will not be surprised to find James, the brother of Jesus, appearing almost from nowhere, but in a leading position, later in that same community (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18).

<sup>20</sup> In this Gospel, Joseph is a disciple who is also “a rich man” (24:57), but not a member of the Sanhedrin. To be described as a rich man is not so positive in Matthew (cf. Matt 19:23-25), but it is not as bad as being a Jewish authority.

Magdalene and the other Mary go to “see the burial” of Jesus (Matt 28:1).<sup>22</sup> There they witness the second quake of this Gospel’s final narrative, a “great” one,<sup>23</sup> see an “angel of the Lord”<sup>24</sup> coming down from heaven, roll away the stone of the tomb, sit on it, and scare everybody else (the soldiers guarding the tomb) to near death (Matt 28:2-4).<sup>25</sup> Then the angel tells them that Jesus is resurrected and that they should go “tell his disciples” to go to Galilee where they (the disciples) will see him. While they are running to “announce” it to them, they meet Jesus, recognize him, genuflect in front of him,<sup>26</sup> touch his feet and receive his greeting and a second commission to go and “announce” to his “brothers” to go to Galilee where they (the brothers) will see him (28:9-10). The wording is particularly solemn and Matthew stresses the fact that the women “immediately” obey, experiencing at the same time “fear and great joy.”<sup>27</sup> At this point the two Marys disappear from the narrative, like all the other women, but we can infer that they did faithfully bring their messages to their expected recipients since we find these ones in Galilee meeting with the resurrected Lord.<sup>28</sup>

If we compare Matthew with Luke and Acts and with John 20-21, we can infer that there must have been lively discussions among the early groups of followers of Jesus regarding who had not only seen the resurrected Lord, but had also received his greeting, talked to him, received a commission, touched his body, and eaten some food (bread? fish? honey?) with him. Mary Magdalene in Matthew appears to be quite privileged in this respect, although all these details do not seem to have any special consequence, given the fact that she and all the other women simply disappear from the narrative (did they go to the mountain in Galilee, with the male disciples?).

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 585.

<sup>22</sup> This sounds a little odd, since no explicit intention is mentioned. Apparently, the women do not want to anoint the body of Jesus, since he had already been anointed, a couple of days earlier, “in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper”, by an anonymous woman who anoints his head, and Jesus explicitly says that she did it “for [his] burial” (26:6-13). It seems that Matthew feels the contradiction in Mark and decides to solve the problem by cancelling Mary Magdalene’s intention of anointing Jesus. This deprives their early visit of any practical function. It is sometimes told in patristic and later exegesis that they go visit the tomb out of love, but if they do not have to “work” (anointing the body, rolling the stone), why do they wait to go until the Sabbath is over? Was the burial place so far from the city that it would have been forbidden? Did they want to avoid contamination by contact with a burial site?

<sup>23</sup> There are three “quakes” in the narrative of this Gospel, the first is the “great” one in 8:24, and the other two take place at the moment of the death of Jesus (27:51,54) and here (28:2). This last quake is also “great,” as is typical of apocalyptic language (see the “great quake” of Rev 11:13). The adjective probably stresses its supernatural dimension, tied to the presence of an angelic power (as we may suppose also in Acts 16:26). The double event in Matthew has always puzzled exegetes. It is probable, though, that the two sets of apocalyptic phenomena, at the death of Jesus and at his resurrection represented by the opening of his tomb, frame the period of the permanence of Jesus in the realm of Death, a period marking the transition from the old to the new economy (in the cosmic history of salvation).

<sup>24</sup> In this Gospel, the figure is immediately identified as an angel, with terminology that this evangelist loves (and appears only in redactional passages; see 1:20.24; 2:13.19).

<sup>25</sup> The text says that they “became like dead,” probably meaning unconscious and/or paralyzed by fear.

<sup>26</sup> Probably the genuflection signifies an act of worship. This is important in view of 28:17, where the believing eleven (male) disciples do genuflect in front of the resurrected Lord while apparently “others have doubts.”

<sup>27</sup> With this phrase, Matthew seems to willingly correct Mark 16:8, where the women are overwhelmed by “fear.”

<sup>28</sup> For my opinion on who meets Jesus on the mountain of Galilee in Matt 28, see Edmondo Lupieri, “La comunità di Matteo e il gruppo dei ‘fratelli’ di Gesù,” in Santiago Guijarro (ed.), *Los comienzos del Cristianismo* (IV Simposio Internacional del Grupo Europeo de Investigación Interdisciplinar sobre los Orígenes del Cristianismo (G.E.R.I.C.O.) [Bibliotheca Salmanticensis, Est. 284], Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 2006), 171-180.

On the other hand, the function of Mary the mother remains quite negative, together with that of the brothers. Only those elements that could diminish the figure of Jesus have been eliminated in Matthew's rendition of Mark 3:21:31-35 at 12:46-50<sup>29</sup> (and of Luke 14:26 at 10:37). Apparently, in Matthew the negative attitude against the brothers of Jesus is still so strong that it involves a similar judgment of the mother. This is not the case in Luke and Acts (where both mother and brothers, as we noticed, are seen positively) and certainly not in John, where (as we will see) the behavior and narrative function of the mother are disconnected from those of the brothers.

#### 4. Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John

As usual, we breathe a different air in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus does not die alone, but, right by the cross, there are four people:<sup>30</sup> his mother, the disciple he loved, Mary of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene, the only two whose names are explicitly remembered here. Apparently, the unnamed mother is there to allow the unnamed disciple to become the only spiritual brother of Jesus, and the two Marys seem to be there to be the eyewitnesses of it (and maybe this is why we have their names: John 9:25-27).<sup>31</sup> Since there is no need to anoint the body of Jesus,<sup>32</sup> no

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<sup>29</sup> Mark 3:21 ("And having heard [this] his relatives came to take him; they said indeed that he was out of mind") is not repeated in Matthew, while Mark 3:31-35 is modified in a way that Jesus' statements against his earthly family are still strong, but any hint of a possible negative judgment against him has disappeared.

<sup>30</sup> See above n. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Although women (like slaves and underage or mentally handicapped persons) were not usually accepted as witnesses (cf. Josephus, *Ant* IV.219), the Bible stresses the need for two witnesses in most cases (e.g., Deut 19:15); this may be why, in the Synoptic narrative, even if men are not present, we always find at least two women, whose names are known, at the empty tomb. Regarding Jesus' mother, we saw how, in the characteristically irenic way of the Book of Acts, her presence shows the unity of the proto-community of Jerusalem from the beginning as well as the continuity of the early ecclesia with the family of the deceased leader (see above n. 19). Particularly, Acts wants to show that the three Palestinian "souls" of the movement, represented by James, Peter, and John, can peacefully coexist and even reach a viable agreement with the fourth and new "soul," the ecclesia of the Gentiles, represented by Paul. As in Acts, in the Fourth Gospel the mother of Jesus is brought into the narrative as a guarantor of authority. In Cana, she believes in Jesus even before seeing the miracle, while the brothers, who apparently were there and saw Jesus' "manifestation" (John 2:11-12), keep their challenging and non-believing attitude towards him (John 7:3-5). At the cross, no brother of Jesus is present, but the mother guarantees the legal succession: the disciple whom Jesus loved is now his brother. The final part of the Gospel (esp. Ch. 21) shows that an agreement must have been reached between the followers of Peter, whose leadership is fully recognized, and those of the disciple whom Jesus loved. It seems to me that, generally speaking, the spiritual authority in any group(s) of followers of Jesus could be and was based on some words of Jesus when he was still in his human flesh (notably Matt 16:15-19), but also and especially on a contact with the resurrected Lord and on his words (Matt 28:15-19). Also, it seems that the foundational events, in terms of definition of authority, are more commonly collective experiences, when the resurrected Lord is seen by a group of faithful. This may put into a second category the individual visions (difficult to verify, although quite developed in the apocryphal traditions), like the ones granted to Paul (according to him and to Acts), to Peter (according to Paul and to Luke), to James (according to Paul), and to Mary Magdalene (according to John). While Paul founds his authority on his individual ecstatic experience (and tries in this way to overcome his "handicap" of not having ever met Jesus when he was in the flesh; see above, n. 10), this does not seem to be considered sufficient by the Fourth Gospel: even the Magdalene had her direct vision of the resurrected Lord and heard his words, but she was nevertheless prohibited to touch him and then disappears from the narrative (see n. 37).

<sup>32</sup> The burial and anointing of Jesus' body is fully in the hands of two male and Jewish crypto-disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (on whose "Nicodemism" see John 3:1-15). Jesus had already been anointed, "six days before Passover," in Bethany, in the house of Lazarus, who had been dead, by Mary his sister. Although the syntactic structure of the sentence is somewhat odd, in the words of Jesus the anointing should have been kept "for the day of [his] burial" (John 12:7). Should we understand that, according to John, Mary did not use all the nard and/or that she was expected to anoint Jesus, once he was dead? In the text of John there is no connection whatsoever between this Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the Magdalene, but the homonymy will play an important role in helping to identify the two Marys as one. At the burial of Jesus, Joseph and Nicodemus seem to be



explicit intention guides Mary Magdalene “early on the first day of the week, when it was still dark,” to go alone to visit the tomb, but in this way she realizes that the stone has been removed. Apparently without looking inside, she runs to tell Peter and the “other disciple, the one Jesus loved,”<sup>33</sup> that Jesus’ body had been stolen. Her words are reported in direct speech.<sup>34</sup> Upon hearing her words, both disciples run to the tomb and the author creates that strange scene, according to which Peter arrives later, but is the first to enter the tomb; then the other does so too, and he, not Peter, is told to have “seen and believed.”<sup>35</sup> In the famous following scene, Mary Magdalene, crying alone outside the tomb, first sees two “angels in white garments” who are sitting inside the tomb and then also Jesus, outside. There is a dialogue between the two;<sup>36</sup> Mary is impeded from touching him,<sup>37</sup> but receives the commission to go and tell his “brothers” that he is ascending to the Father of them all (20:11-17). Mary Magdalene understands that Jesus,

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unaware of Jesus’ anointing by this Mary and spend a lot of money (Nicodemus) and precious time (both of them) in the useless task of anointing a body destined to be resurrected; but they do everything “according to the burial habits of the Jews” (19:41). The Gospel stresses also their hurry since it was “the preparatory day [i.e. a Friday or the eve of a major festival] of the Jews” (19:42). Both still think and act like “Jews,” which is not a compliment in this Gospel – and then they disappear from the narrative.

<sup>33</sup> Apparently, the author wants to show them living together, as it could be implied also by v. 10. The mother of Jesus, who should be living with the disciple whom Jesus loved, seems to have disappeared too.

<sup>34</sup> Notoriously, her words (“They took the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they put him”: 20:2b) create some exegetical problems since it is not clear why Mary Magdalene uses the plural “We do not know.” Some scholars think this comes simply from the tradition, since in the Synoptics the Magdalene is always accompanied by other women and this sentence would originate from that literary context. E.g. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentaries and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 563 or, more recently, Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, BNTC 4 (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 2006), 88-89. Although the hypothesis is difficult to prove or disprove, it is also possible that the author here simply thinks of “we, the faithful.”

<sup>35</sup> Apparently, the disciple whom Jesus loved is the first and possibly the only one to believe (in the resurrection) by seeing the empty tomb, but without having seen the resurrected Lord; later, we see that the disciples believe (by seeing Jesus, receiving his greetings, and possibly touching him). Thomas, who is not there, is able to believe only one week later (after seeing and possibly touching Jesus). Jesus’ blessing, though, comes for the ones who are able to believe without seeing (20:19-29).

<sup>36</sup> It is not unusual in this Gospel that women have a more or less extended dialogue with Jesus (his mother in Cana; the Samaritan woman in Sychar; Mary and Martha in Bethany). In the Magdalene’s case, we have a revelatory dialogue, in which the resurrected Jesus lets her understand who he really is, even if she had not recognized him at the beginning (similarly to the two men in Luke 24:13-31). Analogous cases of acquisition of knowledge through gradual revelation by a “stranger” take place in ancient pagan narratives, when gods meet humans, especially in contexts known as *theoxeniai*. There, humans usually host or help gods travelling on earth *incognito*. It is possible that these narratives have played some role in the development of the evangelical texts (for the idea, see Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10* [Leiden: Brill, 2013]).

<sup>37</sup> This prohibition, coming directly from the Lord and explained “because [he has] not yet ascended to the Father” (20:17) is quite puzzling, especially when one thinks that Thomas is later invited to stick his finger into Jesus’ wounds, in spite of his proverbial doubts (20:24-29). A hypothetical explanation could be that Jesus, not having ascended to the Father yet, has not yet acquired (the totality of?) the Spirit, and therefore the contact with a woman could impede his ascension. That the potential impurity of a woman can impede the ascension towards God is well-known in Jewish mystical circles; see the way used to interrupt R. Nehunyah ben ha-Kanah’s mystical “descent to the Merkabah” in *Hekhalot Rabbati* 18, par. 225-227 (trans. by James R. Davila in *Hekhalot Literature in Translation: Major Texts of Merkavah Mysticism* [Suppl. To JJTP 20; Leiden: Brill, 2013], 112-114); the text is mentioned also by Gershom Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 1947; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 47 and 359, n. 25. Afterwards, having descended from heaven with the fullness of the Spirit, which he can actually give others, Jesus is at no risk of contamination and therefore can be touched by humans (but no women are mentioned).

talking of his “brothers,” actually means his “disciples” and accordingly she goes and tells the disciples that she saw the Lord and what he had told her (20:18).<sup>38</sup>

To sum up, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the empty tomb (even if she does not seem to enter it), the only one who sees two angels, and then the first one to see the resurrected Lord and to talk with him. She would also have touched him, but is impeded; in spite of that, she receives a commission. She finally accomplishes what the Lord had told her to do (apparently the disciples believe her report) and then disappears from the narrative. Even if later only male disciples are allowed and even invited to touch the body of the resurrected Lord, receive the Spirit (not Thomas, though), and eat with Jesus, the importance of Mary Magdalene is definitely stressed in the Fourth Gospel. She is in some way singled out and has a privileged relationship with Jesus, his mother, his aunt, and his most important disciples (who by now are Jesus’ only real brothers, since they are the spiritual, not the physical ones).<sup>39</sup>

### 5. Conclusions Concerning Mary Magdalene in the Earliest Gospels

The figure of Mary Magdalene appears to be increasing in importance in the beliefs of the early generations of followers of Jesus and of the authors responsible for the composition of the books presently in the canonical New Testament.<sup>40</sup> We encountered first the silence of Paul and then the description of what appeared to be a full “failure” in Mark. Definitely a more positive figure in Luke, in spite of some possible reservation by the author, she (together with one or more other women) is on her way to becoming a key figure in the complex of the Christian narrative related to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Luke, indeed, the women see the empty tomb and “two men” who are later explained as “angels.” Even if they are not believed at the beginning and even if they do not receive any commission, they seem to be an example of faithful behavior, under the control of male leadership. In Matthew they seem to have a more important function in the narrative. Not only do they see the angel of the Lord coming down and rolling the tombstone in the midst of a “great (earth)quake,” but they meet and touch the resurrected Lord and receive a commission from him. The following actions by these women are not described, but without them the concluding scene of the Gospel would be impossible. It is in the Fourth Gospel, though, that Mary Magdalene alone is the first one to see Jesus and talk to him<sup>41</sup> and, although she cannot touch him, she is also the only one who is explicitly described as reporting his words to the disciples. This function of intermediary between the resurrected Lord

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<sup>38</sup> In this Gospel, the physical brothers of Jesus are not mentioned any more after their not so positive depiction of Ch. 7. Here the real brothers are the disciples and at 21:23, the last recurrence of the expression, the “brothers” seem to be all the faithful (who accept the Fourth Gospel; see also the following footnote).

<sup>39</sup> I think very probable the idea that the disciple whom Jesus loved is the only real brother of Jesus (19:26-27), and the idea that all his disciples are his brothers (20:17-18) both come from the same redactional layer of the Gospel (see on this Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*. 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1:604 and 606, who thinks both passages belong to the third edition of the book). In any case, the text of John seems to reflect a polemical attitude towards the leadership of James and the physical brothers of Jesus.

<sup>40</sup> The figure of Mary Magdalene is not mentioned in the extant fragments of the so-called (although improperly) Jewish-Christian Gospels nor in the surviving Greek fragments of the *Gospel of Thomas*; as far as we know the next step in existing texts is represented by Mark 16:9-20 and, possibly, by the *Gospel of Peter* (for which see the contribution in this volume by Rogers).

<sup>41</sup> Some authors believe that the use of the epithet *rabbouní*, “my teacher,” by Mary when addressing the resurrected Jesus in John 20:16, shows a particular friendly or intimate relationship, but this is difficult to prove, since also Bartimaeus, whom Jesus had never seen before, uses the expression in Mark 10:51.

and his male disciples seems to be the model for future developments of her figure as authoritative teacher and even as mediator of revelation and salvation.<sup>42</sup>

Although Mary Magdalene and the mother of Jesus are treated differently in Matthew and in Luke, the importance of both figures in the early Christian narrative seems to be growing with time. This is a phenomenon which will be studied in the following chapters, but we can confidently state that its roots are already present in the earlier layers of the literary tradition created by the followers of Jesus.

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<sup>42</sup> See the contributions in this volume by Pardee, Kunder, Fiori, Alexander, and Gross-Diaz.