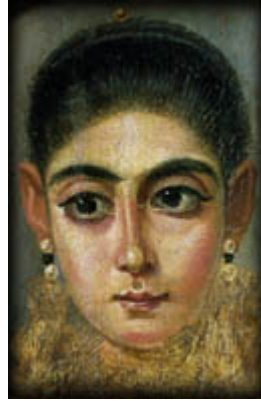


## *Women In Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries*

Scholar Karen King examines the evidence concerning women's important place in early Christianity. She draws a surprising new portrait of Mary Magdalene and outlines the stories of previously unknown early Christian women.

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In the last twenty years, the history of women in ancient Christianity has been almost completely revised. As women historians entered the field in record numbers, they brought with them new questions, developed new methods, and sought for evidence of women's presence in neglected texts and exciting new findings. For example, only a few names of women were widely known: Mary, the [mother of Jesus](#); Mary Magdalene, his disciple and the first witness to the resurrection; Mary and Martha, the sisters who offered him hospitality in Bethany. Now we are learning more of the many women who contributed to the formation of Christianity in its earliest years.

Perhaps most surprising, however, is that the stories of women we thought we knew well are changing in dramatic ways. Chief among these is Mary Magdalene, a woman infamous in Western Christianity as an adulteress and repentant whore. Discoveries of new texts from the dry sands of Egypt, along with sharpened critical insight, have now proven that this portrait of Mary is entirely inaccurate. She was indeed an influential figure, but as a prominent disciple and leader of one wing of the early Christian movement that promoted women's leadership.

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Certainly, the New Testament Gospels, written toward the last quarter of the first century CE, acknowledge that women were among Jesus' earliest followers. From the beginning, Jewish women disciples, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, had accompanied Jesus during his ministry and supported him out of their private means (**Luke 8:1-3**). He spoke to women both in public and private, and indeed he learned from them. According to one story, an unnamed Gentile woman taught Jesus that the ministry of God is not limited to

particular groups and persons, but belongs to all who have faith (**Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28**). A Jewish woman honored him with the extraordinary hospitality of washing his feet with perfume. Jesus was a frequent visitor at the home of Mary and Martha, and was in the habit of teaching and eating meals with women as well as men. When Jesus was arrested, women remained firm, even when his male disciples are said to have fled, and they accompanied him to the foot of the cross. It was women who were reported as the first witnesses to the resurrection, chief among them again Mary Magdalene. Although the details of these gospel stories may be questioned, in general they reflect the prominent historical roles women played in Jesus' ministry as disciples.

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#### WOMEN IN THE FIRST CENTURY OF CHRISTIANITY

After the death of Jesus, women continued to play prominent roles in the early movement. Some scholars have even suggested that the majority of Christians in the first century may have been women.

The letters of Paul - dated to the middle of the first century CE - and his casual greetings to acquaintances offer fascinating and solid information about many Jewish and Gentile women who were prominent in the movement. His letters provide vivid clues about the kind of activities in which women engaged more generally. He greets Prisca, Junia, Julia, and Nereus' sister, who worked and traveled as missionaries in pairs with their husbands or brothers (**Romans 16:3, 7, 15**). He tells us that Prisca and her husband risked their lives to save his. He praises Junia as a prominent apostle, who had been imprisoned for her labor. Mary and Persis are commended for their hard work (**Romans 16:6, 12**). Euodia and Syntyche are called his fellow-workers in the gospel (**Philippians 4:2-3**). Here is clear evidence of women apostles active in the earliest work of spreading the Christian message.

Paul's letters also offer some important glimpses into the inner workings of ancient Christian churches. These groups did not own church buildings but met in homes, no doubt due in part to the fact that Christianity was not legal in the Roman world of its day and in part because of the enormous expense to such fledgling societies. Such homes were a domain in which women played key roles. It is not surprising then to see women taking leadership roles in house churches. Paul tells of women who were the leaders of such house churches (Apphia in **Philemon 2**; Prisca in **I Corinthians 16:19**). This practice is confirmed by other texts that also mention women who headed churches in their homes, such as Lydia of Thyatira (**Acts 16:15**) and Nympha of Laodicea (**Colossians 4:15**). Women held

offices and played significant roles in group worship. Paul, for example, greets a deacon named Phoebe (**Romans 16:1**) and assumes that women are praying and prophesying during worship (**I Corinthians 11**). As prophets, women's roles would have included not only ecstatic public speech, but preaching, teaching, leading prayer, and perhaps even performing the eucharist meal. (A later first century work, called the **Didache**, assumes that this duty fell regularly to Christian prophets.)

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#### MARY MAGDALENE: A TRUER PORTRAIT

Later texts support these early portraits of women, both in exemplifying their prominence and confirming their leadership roles (**Acts 17:4, 12**). Certainly the most prominent among these in the ancient church was Mary Magdalene. A series of spectacular 19th and 20th century discoveries of Christian texts in Egypt dating to the second and third century have yielded a treasury of new information. It was already known from the New Testament gospels that Mary was a Jewish woman who followed Jesus of Nazareth. Apparently of independent means, she accompanied Jesus during his ministry and supported him out of her own resources (**Mark 15:40-41; Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 8:1-3; John 19:25**).

Although other information about her is more fantastic, she is repeatedly portrayed as a visionary and leader of the early movement. (**Mark 16:1-9; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:1, 11-18; Gospel of Peter**). In the **Gospel of John**, the risen Jesus gives her special teaching and commissions her as an apostle to the apostles to bring them the good news. She obeys and is thus the first to announce the resurrection and to play the role of an apostle, although the term is not specifically used of her. Later tradition, however, will herald her as "the apostle to the apostles." The strength of this literary tradition makes it possible to suggest that historically Mary was a prophetic visionary and leader within one sector of the early Christian movement after the death of Jesus.

The newly discovered Egyptian writings elaborate this portrait of Mary as a favored disciple. Her role as "apostle to the apostles" is frequently explored, especially in considering her faith in contrast to that of the male disciples who refuse to believe her testimony. She is most often portrayed in texts that claim to record dialogues of Jesus with his disciples, both before and after the resurrection. In the **Dialogue of the Savior**, for example, Mary is named along with Judas (Thomas) and Matthew in the course of an extended dialogue with Jesus. During the discussion, Mary addresses several questions to the Savior as a representative of the disciples as a group. She thus appears

as a prominent member of the disciple group and is the only woman named. Moreover, in response to a particularly insightful question, the Lord says of her, "You make clear the abundance of the revealer!" (140.17-19). At another point, after Mary has spoken, the narrator states, "She uttered this as a woman who had understood completely"(139.11-13). These affirmations make it clear that Mary is to be counted among the disciples who fully comprehended the Lord's teaching (142.11-13).

In another text, the **Sophia of Jesus Christ**, Mary also plays a clear role among those whom Jesus teaches. She is one of the seven women and twelve men gathered to hear the Savior after the resurrection, but before his ascension. Of these only five are named and speak, including Mary. At the end of his discourse, he tells them, "I have given you authority over all things as children of light," and they go forth in joy to preach the gospel. Here again Mary is included among those special disciples to whom Jesus entrusted his most elevated teaching, and she takes a role in the preaching of the gospel.

In the **Gospel of Philip**, Mary Magdalene is mentioned as one of three Marys "who always walked with the Lord" and as his companion (59.6-11). The work also says that Lord loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often (63.34-36). The importance of this portrayal is that yet again the work affirms the special relationship of Mary Magdalene to Jesus based on her spiritual perfection.

In the **Pistis Sophia**, Mary again is preeminent among the disciples, especially in the first three of the four books. She asks more questions than all the rest of the disciples together, and the Savior acknowledges that: "Your heart is directed to the Kingdom of Heaven more than all your brothers" (26:17-20). Indeed, Mary steps in when the other disciples are despairing in order to intercede for them to the Savior (218:10-219:2). Her complete spiritual comprehension is repeatedly stressed.

She is, however, most prominent in the early second century **Gospel of Mary**, which is ascribed pseudonymously to her. More than any other early Christian text, the **Gospel of Mary** presents an unflinchingly favorable portrait of Mary Magdalene as a woman leader among the disciples. The Lord himself says she is blessed for not wavering when he appears to her in a vision. When all the other disciples are weeping and frightened, she alone remains steadfast in her faith because she has grasped and appropriated the salvation offered in Jesus' teachings. Mary models the ideal disciple: she steps into the role of the Savior at his departure, comforts, and instructs the other disciples. Peter asks her to tell any words of the Savior which she might know but that the other

disciples have not heard. His request acknowledges that Mary was preeminent among women in Jesus' esteem, and the question itself suggests that Jesus gave her private instruction. Mary agrees and gives an account of "secret" teaching she received from the Lord in a vision. The vision is given in the form of a dialogue between the Lord and Mary; it is an extensive account that takes up seven out of the eighteen pages of the work. At the conclusion of the work, Levi confirms that indeed the Saviour loved her more than the rest of the disciples (18.14-15). While her teachings do not go unchallenged, in the end the **Gospel of Mary** affirms both the truth of her teachings and her authority to teach the male disciples. She is portrayed as a prophetic visionary and as a leader among the disciples.

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#### OTHER CHRISTIAN WOMEN

Other women appear in later literature as well. One of the most famous woman apostles was Thecla, a virgin-martyr converted by Paul. She cut her hair, donned men's clothing, and took up the duties of a missionary apostle. Threatened with rape, prostitution, and twice put in the ring as a martyr, she persevered in her faith and her chastity. Her lively and somewhat fabulous story is recorded in the second century **Acts of Thecla**. From very early, an order of women who were widows served formal roles of ministry in some churches (**I Timothy 5:9-10**). The most numerous clear cases of women's leadership, however, are offered by prophets: Mary Magdalene, the Corinthian women, Philip's daughters, Ammia of Philadelphia, Philumene, the visionary martyr Perpetua, Maximilla, Priscilla (Prisca), and Quintilla. There were many others whose names are lost to us. The African church father Tertullian, for example, describes an unnamed woman prophet in his congregation who not only had ecstatic visions during church services, but who also served as a counselor and healer (**On the Soul 9.4**). A remarkable collection of oracles from another unnamed woman prophet was discovered in Egypt in 1945. She speaks in the first person as the feminine voice of God: **Thunder, Perfect Mind**. The prophets Prisca and Quintilla inspired a Christian movement in second century Asia Minor (called the New Prophecy or Montanism) that spread around the Mediterranean and lasted for at least four centuries. Their oracles were collected and published, including the account of a vision in which Christ appeared to the prophet in the form of a woman and "put wisdom" in her (Epiphanius, **Panarion 49.1**). Montanist Christians ordained women as presbyters and bishops, and women held the title of prophet. The third century African bishop Cyprian also tells of an ecstatic woman prophet from Asia Minor who celebrated the eucharist and performed baptisms (**Epistle 74.10**). In the early second century, the Roman governor Pliny tells of two slave women he tortured who were deacons (**Letter to Trajan 10.96**). Other

women were ordained as priests in fifth century Italy and Sicily (Gelasius, **Epistle 14.26**).

Women were also prominent as martyrs and suffered violently from torture and painful execution by wild animals and paid gladiators. In fact, the earliest writing definitely by a woman is the prison diary of Perpetua, a relatively wealthy matron and nursing mother who was put to death in Carthage at the beginning of the third century on the charge of being a Christian. In it, she records her testimony before the local Roman ruler and her defiance of her father's pleas that she recant. She tells of the support and fellowship among the confessors in prison, including other women. But above all, she records her prophetic visions. Through them, she was not merely reconciled passively to her fate, but claimed the power to define the meaning of her own death. In a situation where Romans sought to use their violence against her body as a witness to their power and justice, and where the Christian editor of her story sought to turn her death into a witness to the truth of Christianity, her own writing lets us see the human being caught up in these political struggles. She actively relinquishes her female roles as mother, daughter, and sister in favor of defining her identity solely in spiritual terms. However horrifying or heroic her behavior may seem, her brief diary offers an intimate look at one early Christian woman's spiritual journey.

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#### EARLY CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

Study of works by and about women is making it possible to begin to reconstruct some of the theological views of early Christian women. Although they are a diverse group, certain reoccurring elements appear to be common to women's theology-making. By placing the teaching of the **Gospel of Mary** side-by-side with the theology of the Corinthian women prophets, the Montanist women's oracles, **Thunder Perfect Mind**, and Perpetua's prison diary, it is possible to discern shared views about teaching and practice that may exemplify some of the contents of women's theology:

- Jesus was understood primarily as a teacher and mediator of wisdom rather than as ruler and judge.
- Theological reflection centered on the experience of the person of the risen Christ more than the crucified savior. Interestingly enough, this is true even in the case of the martyr Perpetua. One might expect her to identify with the suffering Christ, but it is the risen Christ she encounters in her vision.
- Direct access to God is possible for all through receiving the Spirit.
- In Christian community, the unity, power, and perfection of the

- Spirit are present now, not just in some future time.
- Those who are more spiritually advanced give what they have freely to all without claim to a fixed, hierarchical ordering of power.
  - An ethics of freedom and spiritual development is emphasized over an ethics of order and control.
  - A woman's identity and spirituality could be developed apart from her roles as wife and mother (or slave), whether she actually withdrew from those roles or not. Gender is itself contested as a "natural" category in the face of the power of God's Spirit at work in the community and the world. This meant that potentially women (and men) could exercise leadership on the basis of spiritual achievement apart from gender status and without conformity to established social gender roles.
  - Overcoming social injustice and human suffering are seen to be integral to spiritual life.

Women were also actively engaged in reinterpreting the texts of their tradition. For example, another new text, the **Hypostasis of the Archons**, contains a retelling of the Genesis story ascribed to Eve's daughter Norea, in which her mother Eve appears as the instructor of Adam and his healer.

The new texts also contain an unexpected wealth of Christian imagination of the divine as feminine. The long version of the **Apocryphon of John**, for example, concludes with a hymn about the descent of divine Wisdom, a feminine figure here called the Pronoia of God. She enters into the lower world and the body in order to awaken the innermost spiritual being of the soul to the truth of its power and freedom, to awaken the spiritual power it needs to escape the counterfeit powers that enslave the soul in ignorance, poverty, and the drunken sleep of spiritual deadness, and to overcome illegitimate political and sexual domination. The oracle collection **Thunder Perfect Mind** also adds crucial evidence to women's prophetic theology-making. This prophet speaks powerfully to women, emphasizing the presence of women in her audience and insisting upon their identity with the feminine voice of the Divine. Her speech lets the hearers transverse the distance between political exploitation and empowerment, between the experience of degradation and the knowledge of infinite self-worth, between despair and peace. It overcomes the fragmentation of the self by naming it, cherishing it, insisting upon the multiplicity of self-hood and experience.

These elements may not be unique to women's religious thought or always result in women's leadership, but as a constellation they point

toward one type of theologizing that was meaningful to some early Christian women, that had a place for women's legitimate exercise of leadership, and to whose construction women contributed. If we look to these elements, we are able to discern important contributions of women to early Christian theology and praxis. These elements also provide an important location for discussing some aspects of early Christian women's spiritual lives: their exercise of leadership, their ideals, their attraction to Christianity, and what gave meaning to their self-identity as Christians.

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#### UNDERMINING WOMEN'S PROMINENCE

Women's prominence did not, however, go unchallenged. Every variety of ancient Christianity that advocated the legitimacy of women's leadership was eventually declared heretical, and evidence of women's early leadership roles was erased or suppressed.

This erasure has taken many forms. Collections of prophetic oracles were destroyed. Texts were changed. For example, at least one woman's place in history was obscured by turning her into a man! In **Romans 16:7**, the apostle Paul sends greetings to a woman named Junia. He says of her and her male partner Andronicus that they are "my kin and my fellow prisoners, prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me." Concluding that women could not be apostles, textual editors and translators transformed Junia into Junias, a man.

Or women's stories could be rewritten and alternative traditions could be invented. In the case of Mary Magdalene, starting in the fourth century, Christian theologians in the Latin West associated Mary Magdalene with the unnamed sinner who anointed Jesus' feet in **Luke 7:36-50**. The confusion began by conflating the account in **John 12:1-8**, in which Mary (of Bethany) anoints Jesus, with the anointing by the unnamed woman sinner in the accounts of **Luke**. Once this initial, erroneous identification was secured, Mary Magdalene could be associated with every unnamed sinful woman in the gospels, including the adulteress in **John 8:1-11** and the Syro-phenician woman with her five and more "husbands" in **John 4:7-30**. Mary the apostle, prophet, and teacher had become Mary the repentant whore. This fiction was invented at least in part to undermine her influence and with it the appeal to her apostolic authority to support women in roles of leadership.

Until recently the texts that survived have shown only the side that won. The new texts are therefore crucial in constructing a fuller and more accurate portrait. The **Gospel of Mary**, for example, argued that

leadership should be based on spiritual maturity, regardless of whether one is male or female. This Gospel lets us hear an alternative voice to the one dominant in canonized works like **I Timothy**, which tried to silence women and insist that their salvation lies in bearing children. We can now hear the other side of the controversy over women's leadership and see what arguments were given in favor of it.

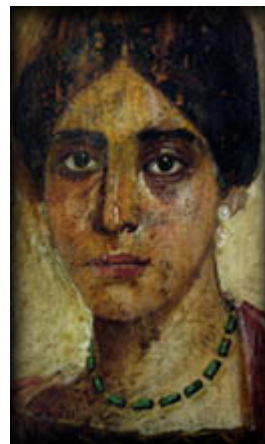
It needs to be emphasized that the formal elimination of women from official roles of institutional leadership did not eliminate women's actual presence and importance to the Christian tradition, although it certainly seriously damaged their capacity to contribute fully. What is remarkable is how much evidence has survived systematic attempts to erase women from history, and with them the warrants and models for women's leadership. The evidence presented here is but the tip of an iceberg.

### *The Roles for Women*

Although later pushed to the side, women in early Christian communities often owned the "house churches" where congregations gathered to worship.

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#### **What was the status**



#### **What was the status of women in the early church? Were they particularly attracted to it?**

The status of women in early Christianity has been quite debated in recent decades, no doubt prompted by interest in the women's movement in Western countries today. I think the evidence is somewhat mixed. Certainly there's evidence in the New Testament itself of women doing many things within early Christianity. In Paul's letters he greets women.

Calls them co-workers. Refers to one of them [with] a word in Greek that we would translate as "deaconess." Even calls one of the women an Apostle. What exactly these terms meant is a little hard to say given the distance in time, but there's plenty of evidence of women's activity. I think part of the activity in the early period, that is the New Testament period itself, perhaps is related to women's role in the house churches. The earliest Christian communities met in people's houses; they didn't have churches yet for quite some time, and throughout the New Testament, particularly Paul's letters in the Book of Acts, we find out that women owned the houses in which the early Christians met. This I think is significant because I don't think the women who owned the houses were simply providing coffee and cookies, in effect, for the Christian community. I think that this probably gave them some avenue to power... in the church.

What seems to happen within the first few centuries is that whatever limited activities women might have had in the beginning begin to get curtailed as you have the development of a hierarchy of clergy members with bishops, presbyters and deacons, and it's pretty firmly established that women should not be either bishops or priests. Many church fathers write about this. So that women tend to get excluded from those functions, [though] they do have some roles, [such] as joining a group called the widows or deaconesses in the fourth century. We have good evidence of a order of deaconesses, but they are excluded from the priesthood.

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## THECLA

Thecla is a literary character of probably second century Christianity who comes to be thought of as an actual historical character by the fourth century. Thecla appears in a document called The Acts of Paul and Thecla which is one of the many sets of acts that came to be labeled the apocryphal acts.... Thecla's represented as being an aristocratic young woman who hears the teaching of Paul, and upon hearing the message of Paul, which is construed in this text... as a message of sexual renunciation, she gives up her fiancée and wants to go off and follow Paul on his missionary trips. Her family is very much opposed to this. Her mother goes so far as to try to have her daughter burned at the stake to prevent her from carrying out this wish, but after many lively adventures including baptizing herself in a pool of seals, Thecla does manage to become a missionary and lives to a ripe old age preaching and teaching the gospel. So this is one of several stories in the apocryphal acts where women are represented as giving up riches and particularly marriage and sexual activity for the sake of following the teachings of the Apostles....

### **What in essence is the moral of the Thecla story?**

I think the moral of the Thecla story is that young women would be better off not marrying in the first place, but if they are already married to try to as soon as possible... to lead lives of abstinence and sexual renunciation, and in that way they will be better fulfilling the will of God. In the Acts of Thecla for example, Paul gives a speech in which he recasts the part of the bible that we call the beatitudes. That's the "blessed are the so and so...." Paul's version of this is all about blessed are the bodies of virgins, ... blessed

are the chaste. It's all about sexual chastity. That those are the people who are blessed in this new recasting of the Christian message.

Read excerpts from The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

**Did stories like Thecla -- the fact that the early church is urging people to abstinence, to effectively be breaking up their families, leaving their fiancées -- Does that create tension within the church, or does that create tension with society?**

The fact that some young women and men wanted, on the basis of hearing these injunctions to sexual chastity, to abandon societal life, not to marry, not to have children as their parents probably wanted them to, [is] certainly depicted in early Christian writings as causing a problem. In fact, I think we would analyze this today as a case of adolescent rebellion. That you hear many stories from the fourth and early fifth century, particularly, of aristocratic young women who decide they're not going to be obey their parents' command to marry. At this [time] ... aristocratic girls marry very young, in young teenage years probably, and their refusal to do this, and concordant with that their control of enormous sums of money devolving upon them, was a very great asset to the Christian church, and these women were much celebrated and written about and praised by the male authors of this period....

**Jesus is often portrayed as in the company of women. What's the significance of that?**

Women appear frequently, although they're not always named, in the gospels in the company of Jesus. I think it's part of a more general tendency of the gospels to represent Jesus as having to do with the outcasts, the down and outs of society. The people who aren't necessarily the high and mighty and powerful. Just as Jesus is represented as consorting with sinners, so likewise women are part of his entourage. Some of the gospels are more eager to portray Jesus in this way than others. The Gospel of Luke for example does have Jesus in the company of women quite frequently. You have a number of the stories about Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke.

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#### MARY MAGDALENE

**Tell us how the character Mary Magdalene evolved. I mean was there really such a person to begin with or was it just a story about someone like that?**

Mary Magdalene is certainly one of the characters who crops up a lot in the gospels and then is very much discussed in Christian literature the fourth and fifth century particularly. It's interesting to see what happens with her character. We know practically nothing about her, but quite early on she gets conflated with the sinful woman who is said to come in to a dinner party where Jesus is being entertained at the home of a Jewish leader and who washes Jesus' feet and dries the feet with her hair and she is called a sinner. Now it doesn't say what kind of sinner she is, but this story gets conflated with the Mary Magdalene story. Mary Magdalene comes to be thought of as a repentant prostitute.

Now why this would have great appeal for the early Christians I'm not entirely sure except that she is an example of somebody who is a very notable sinner and yet repentant and found great praise in the eyes of God. She's also represented as being a witness to the resurrection in the gospels, and this is an important point that here you can see the difference in Paul's letters. Paul does not have the women as witnesses to the resurrection whereas all the gospels have women as witnesses to the resurrection and Mary Magdalene very prominent among them....

Mary Magdalene's probably a good example of a character who appears a number of times in the biblical text itself who then gets raised up and developed and elaborated upon. This is probably fairly typical of what happens to a lot of characters. Their lives get embroidered upon in ways that we wouldn't really know from the biblical text itself. So Mary Magdalene is thought of as this sinner who repents. This gets elaborated into repentant prostitute particularly when Christianity takes a very ascetic turn in the fourth and fifth centuries; to repent from being a prostitute would certainly be a very wonderful thing for a woman to do if she were a Christian....

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#### **POWERFUL, WEALTHY WOMEN**

In the New Testament, we find many women mentioned, some by name, some not.... They are named as co-workers, some of them seem to be part of missionary couples that go out and help convert others to Christianity. We find less evidence of this as you move into the 2nd century and the 3rd century; as Christianity becomes more established, and a male hierarchy of the clergy is developed, women tend to get more and more excluded....

However, with the development of strong ascetic currents in Christianity and particularly the founding of monasteries in the 4th century and early 5th century, you get whole new avenue opened up for women's activity in the church. Some of these women controlled enormous amounts of money and they decided that they would use their money to found monasteries and they sometimes became head of the monasteries themselves. One such woman was named Olympias in Constantinople. She was a very good friend and, in fact, the confidante of John Chrysostom, who became the Bishop of Constantinople the last few years of the 4th century and the first years of the 5th century. She had enormous property; it's been calculated, using rather conservative estimates of how you translate ancient money into modern American dollars, that her contributions to the Church of Constantinople and surrounding areas was something like \$900 million. You can see why churchmen liked women like this and why it was very important for the charity operations of the church, which were now feeding hundreds, indeed thousands, of poor people, orphans, widows; hospitals needed to be built that Christians were organizing. The church needed a lot of money poured into its coffers to keep these operations going, and women such as Olympias and others that could be mentioned, Malania the Elder, Malania the Younger, they're very instrumental, both in founding monasteries and directing them, as well as giving money for these charitable operations.

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#### **GALATIANS 3:28**

*It's certainly true that there was a sort of fluidity of roles in this movement... if slaves and free could be equally part of the movement could men and women be on a par in the movement?*

### **What's Paul saying here, what does it mean?**

Galatians 3:28 is a statement that has had enormous influence on contemporary Christianity, particularly in the feminist branches of Christianity. This is the passage where Paul says, "In Jesus Christ, there's no slave or free, no Jew or Greek, no male" - here, one has put in a correction. It's "no male and female." That is, instead of saying, either /or, as he does in the case of Jews and Greeks, slave and free. With male and female, it's "and" that's in the middle, and scholars have asked what does it mean and why is that one different?

Of course, contemporary Christians, many of them, would like to take this as a great slogan of equality for women in the early church. I personally tend to think Paul was not terribly interested in women's equality. He was very interested in the equality of Jew and gentile. That is, people coming in to Christianity from non-Jewish religions. That was his major concern, without doubt. He took over this phrase, we know, from an earlier baptismal formula. There's some evidence in the Gospel of Thomas and other gospels that Jesus may have said phrases to this effect of "no male and female" and some people think that it's a quotation from Genesis, Chapter 1, where it says, "God created them male and female, he created them." In this case, I think at least, probably, we can't take it as a wonderful slogan for equality, although women today would like to use it that way, and maybe they can go ahead and use it whatever Paul meant by it.

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#### **Elaine H. Pagels:**

The Harrington Spear Paine Foundation Professor of Religion Princeton University

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#### **WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

Some people suggest that the early Christian movement was an egalitarian one. I'm not so sure of that. It does seem to me that when it was a marginal movement, when it was dangerous to belong to it. [In his letters] Paul speaks of women as his fellow evangelists and teachers and patrons and friends, as he does of men. So it seems that the movement took anybody that it could get, and depended on them in ways that much more established groups, like for example, the Jewish community of a wealthy town like Sapphires, might not have allowed. It's certainly true that there was a sort of fluidity of roles in this movement, the question of if slaves and free could be equally part of the movement could men and women be on a par in the movement?

Obviously we have sources that suggest that these were enormously live issues. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, for example, shows us a Christian community in which Mary Magdalene is regarded as a disciple, as a leader, as one of the major teachers in the group. And one who claims that women should be able to teach. In that very gospel, she's challenged and silenced by her brother, Peter, suggesting that the representatives of the church that called itself orthodox and based itself in Rome did not like women setting



themselves up. We know that Tertullian, one of the leaders of the church in Africa, spoke about a woman he called simply, "that viper," because she was baptizing people. And he said, "These heretical woman, how audacious they are. I mean they, they teach, they baptize, they preach, they do all kinds of things they shouldn't do. It's horrible, in short." And so we know that there was a great deal of ferment in these communities about the role of women.

I don't see a picture of a Golden Age of egalitarianism back there. I see a new, unformed, diverse, and threatened movement which allowed a lot more fluidity for women in certain roles for a while, in some places and not in others. That [also] stirred an enormous amount of resentment, which you see in some of the New Testament writers, for example, in the author of [First] Timothy, which says, "women should be silent in all the churches" and attributes that point of view to Paul.

### **Did women become, over time, sort of moved to the edges so to speak?**

We have information from about the end of the second century that whatever roles women may have had earlier, leaders of the church were beginning to clarify the fact that women should have no official position in the church as they were establishing it. And that was seen as a characteristic of heretical groups. The orthodox church would have none of that, and did not, so far as we can tell, from about the second century on. Where women distinguished themselves in the orthodox community were as martyrs.... And there are famous women who are martyrs. There was a famous holy woman, Theca, whose story describes enormous opposition. There's not a single woman of renown in the ancient church whose story does not show enormous opposition from some of the men in the group.

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### **MARY MAGDALENE**

#### **Was Mary Magdalene another apostle?**

The gospels of the New Testament tell stories about Mary Magdalene, and there she appears along with the women.... [In Luke], Mary was one whom Jesus had healed. But in other gospels, she appears quite differently. She appears in fact as one of the disciples, not only one of the disciples, but one of those chosen for special teaching, for deeper teaching and wisdom. In the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, she appears as the one disciple who has courage and comforts the others in despair. She appears as the one who speaks to the others to encourage them. So she seems to be one of the great disciples according to some of these other sources. Later tradition suggested she was a prostitute and that she was the one who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. This is not said in the gospels. It has no foundation in history at all. I suspect that there were Christians who were trying to challenge her status among certain groups who saw her as a great one of the disciples. For example, even today on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, there's a Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene as a great saint. And others countered, I suggest, by saying, "Oh no, she was a prostitute." So there, in the person of Mary Magdalene, [we see how] groups fought about the status and role of women.

