

# Mary Magdalene: Author of the Fourth Gospel?

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## INTRODUCTION

This article makes a case for ascribing authorship of the Fourth Gospel (the Gospel of John) in the New Testament to Mary Magdalene. As far as I know -- no previously published work has made an argument in support of this hypothesis. Most biblical scholars today assert that the Fourth Gospel was authored by an anonymous follower of Jesus referred to within the Gospel text as the Beloved Disciple. It is posited here that, in an earlier tradition of the Fourth Gospel's community, the now "anonymous" Beloved Disciple was known to be Mary Magdalene. It is further posited that Mary Magdalene is the true founder and hero of what has come to be known as the Johannine Community (i.e., Mary Magdalene was one of the original apostolic founders and leaders of the early Christian church).

I realize that this hypothesis may seem very radical and perhaps unorthodox to you. However, I believe that it is well-founded and I respectfully offer the following in support of it. The evidence supporting this thesis includes some of the Gnostic Christian writings of the Nag Hammadi Library, and internal evidence from the text of the Fourth Gospel itself. This study also relies heavily on the Johannine Community research done by Raymond E. Brown (America's foremost Catholic biblical scholar).

I have made every attempt to write this article in such a way that it can be easily followed and understood by those without prior biblical scholarship knowledge. It is written and dedicated to those who embrace the love of God, who love and respect the church, and who are open-minded enough to investigate new ideas without feeling threatened by them. (A Works Cited list is provided for you at the end of this article.)

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To this day, Mary Magdalene remains a most elusive and mysterious figure. Speculation about her role in the development of early Christianity is not new. She has been the subject of many different theories and myths throughout ecclesiastical history. Such speculation is the result of the deafening silence from the Scriptures regarding this woman who is cited by all four Gospels as being present at both the Crucifixion of Jesus *and* the Empty Tomb on the morning of the Resurrection. Why is it that we know virtually nothing else about her? Has she made contributions to the development of the early church of which we are not aware?

Here is a fact that few people seem to know: The Bible never explicitly says that Mary Magdalene was ever a prostitute at any point in her life. Luke does not name her in his narrative about the "penitent whore" who washes the feet of Jesus with her hair (7:36-50). Nor is she named as the woman who was caught in the act of adultery and saved from being stoned to death by Jesus (John 8:1-11). She *is* identified as once having been demon-possessed (Luke 8:2). However, the assumption that her sinful past consisted primarily of sexual sin is a presumption that is not usually made about the men who are identified as former sinners. Susan Haskins has published an excellent study of the many myths and misconceptions surrounding Mary Magdalene. Her book is a "must read" for anyone who wishes to do a serious study of the Magdalene.

## MY THESIS

We begin by presupposing the following well-settled position: The many positive contributions made by women to the development of the early church have been minimized throughout history. Claudia Setzer has recently reminded

us that women, especially Mary Magdalene, were essential witnesses to the Risen Christ. Setzer (259) asserts that the prominent role of female disciples was an early and firmly entrenched piece of tradition which quickly became an embarrassment to the male leaders of the emerging institutional church. Many prominent scholars have argued, quite convincingly, that there was a concerted effort on the part of the male leadership of the early church to suppress the knowledge of any major contributions made by female disciples. It is asserted here that much of Mary Magdalene's legacy fell victim to this suppression.

This study posits the theory that the Fourth Gospel, once universally believed to have been authored by John of Zebedee, was actually authored by Mary Magdalene. It is further posited that she was the Beloved Disciple of the Fourth Gospel and, therefore, the founder and leader of what has come to be known as the Johannine Community. Indeed, there is more evidence pointing to *her* authorship of the Fourth Gospel than there ever was pointing to authorship by John.

The research of Raymond E. Brown (1979) is used as the primary basis for this study. Brown's research on the Johannine Community is clearly second-to-none. He is readily acknowledged by most theologians today as America's foremost Catholic Scripture scholar. This study does not dispute any of Brown's essential assertions on this subject. Rather, I use much of Brown's research to substantiate the hypothesis in this article. This study builds on Brown's research by attempting to identify the author of the Fourth Gospel where Brown does not. At one time, Brown did argue that the Fourth Gospel was authored by John of Zebedee (1966: xcvi). However, Brown has since changed his view on this because he found that there was little evidence to support Johannine authorship of this Gospel (1979: 33).

Mary Magdalene is posited as the author of the Fourth Gospel in the sense in which antiquity defined authorship (Brown 1990: 1051-1052). The author is the person whose ideas the book expresses, not necessarily the person who set pen to papyrus (Brown 1966: lxxxvii). According to Brown, the Fourth Gospel was authored by an anonymous follower of Jesus referred to in the Gospel text as the Beloved Disciple. This Beloved Disciple knew Jesus personally and was in the originating group of the Johannine Community (Brown 1979: 31). The Fourth Gospel was based on this disciple's own eyewitness account (John 21:24). Brown identifies several phases in the development of the Fourth Gospel: 1) the initial pre-Gospel version authored by the Beloved Disciple; 2) the pre-Gospel work produced by "the evangelist" or main writer; and, 3) the final version written by a redactor after the death of the Beloved Disciple (1979:22-23).

I assert that Mary Magdalene's contribution to the writing of the Fourth Gospel took place within the first phase of development identified by Brown -- i.e., the initial pre-Gospel version. The Gospel went through several phases of modification. The end result of these modifications was the eventual suppression of her role as author of this Gospel and leader of their community.

## THE BELOVED DISCIPLE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Before we go any further, let us take a look at what the Fourth Gospel actually says about this Beloved Disciple. In the Gospel of John there are seven passages which refer to the beloved anonymous founder of the Johannine Community. These passages are as follows:

1. (1:35-40) This passage refers to "another disciple" who heard John the Baptist and followed Jesus along with Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Even though this passage does not specifically refer to the disciple as being loved by Jesus, Brown argues that this passage is a reference to the Beloved Disciple. He says that the disciple is not referred to as the beloved simply because he is not yet a disciple of Jesus at this point in the story (Brown 1979: 33).
2. (13:23-26) This passage clearly refers to the anonymous disciple as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The disciple is sitting next to Jesus during the Last Supper. Peter nods to the disciple to get him to ask Jesus for the identity of his betrayer. The disciple asks Jesus and Jesus tells him that his betrayer is, of course, going to be Judas Iscariot.
3. (18:15-16) After the arrest of Jesus, the other disciple is allowed to enter the courtyard of the high priest with him. Peter, on the other hand, was not allowed in at first. Peter was let in only after the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, spoke to the gatekeeper. The other disciple is not explicitly referred to as the Beloved Disciple.

However, Brown asserts that this passage refers to the same disciple whom Jesus loved (1979: 82).

4. (19:25-27) The Beloved Disciple is at the foot of the Cross along with the mother of Jesus, and other women including Mary Magdalene. Jesus tells the Beloved Disciple to take care of his mother. The disciple is said to have taken the mother of Jesus into his home.

5. (20:1-11) Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved run to the Empty Tomb after being told by Mary Magdalene that the body of the Lord was missing.

6. (21:7) In this passage, several of the disciples are out fishing after the Resurrection of Christ. The Beloved Disciple is the first to notice that the man who was speaking to them was Jesus. The disciple says to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

7. (21:20-24) The Beloved Disciple's death is addressed in a conversation between Peter and the Risen Christ. The passage also asserts that the Gospel was written by the Beloved Disciple and based on his eyewitness testimony. Chapter 21 was obviously written by a redactor (or editor) after the death of the Beloved Disciple.

You may note at this point that in the above cited passages from the Gospel of John, the Beloved Disciple is clearly male. Also, in 19:25-27 and 20:1-11 the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene appear in the same scenes simultaneously. How can I allege that Mary Magdalene is the Beloved Disciple in light of this? The answer will be addressed in detail below. But for now: The reason that the Beloved Disciple was turned into a man in the text was because this disciple was clearly the founder and hero of the community that produced this Gospel. At some point after the death of Jesus, the emerging male leadership of that community simply became embarrassed about having a female founder. (Remember, we're dealing with male attitudes towards women 2,000 years ago.) In order to "mainstream" their community, they suppressed some of the more radical practices that Jesus taught them through his example -- such as treating *everyone* with equal dignity and respect, including the sick, the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and women. Jesus apparently did not object to men and women sharing power and positions of leadership. Some of his successors, however, were not courageous enough to be so radical. So, in the case of the Gospel of John, the female Beloved Disciple had to become male. I will elaborate on just how I believe this happened below.

One *fact* is very clear: For some reason, the writer of the Gospel of John wanted to keep the identity of the Beloved Disciple a secret. This disciple was obviously an extremely important figure in the history of their community. Why, then, is the name of this disciple concealed? Was the goal to protect this disciple from persecution? Hardly -- after all, the disciple was clearly deceased when the final draft of John's Gospel was produced (21:20-24). Is it possible that the writer of the final draft had forgotten the name of their beloved founder? Not very likely. This is, indeed, an interesting mystery.

## THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Today, the majority of biblical scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, assert that St. John of Zebedee did *not* write the Gospel that bears his name. They ascribe authorship to the "anonymous" Beloved Disciple. So, if the evidence pointing to John as author of this Gospel is so flimsy -- how, then, did this book become known universally as the Gospel of John?

The Fourth Gospel was initially accepted earliest by "heterodox" rather than "orthodox" Christians (Brown 1979: 147). The oldest known commentary on the Fourth Gospel is that of the Gnostic Heracleon (d. 180). The Valentinian Gnostics appropriated the Fourth Gospel to such an extent that Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202) had to refute their exegesis of it. Brown well notes the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the early Christian Gnostics when he writes that there is "abundant evidence of familiarity with Johannine ideas in the...gnostic library from Nag Hammadi" (1979: 147). In contrast to this, Brown points out that clear use of the Fourth Gospel in the early church by "orthodox" sources is difficult to prove (1979: 148). This would seem to suggest that the contents of the Fourth Gospel, at one point, were not attractive to "orthodox" Christians yet very attractive to Gnostic Christians for some

reason. In fact, the earliest indisputable "orthodox" use of the Fourth Gospel was by Theophilus of Antioch, c. 180 A.D., in his *Apology to Autolytus*. This strong connection between the Fourth Gospel and Gnostic Christians provides significant support for my thesis.

If you are unfamiliar with Gnostics, I suggest that you look them up. They were branded as heretics by the emerging institutional church very early on in ecclesiastical history. Of significance to this study is the following: Many Gnostic groups practiced radical egalitarianism. They believed that God acted and spoke through both men *and* women. Both men and women were known to be leaders and/or prophets in their communities. Many men, including those in the church, felt threatened by them.

The popularity of the Fourth Gospel among Gnostics made it important for the early church to pursue the question of its apostolic authorship (Perkins: 946). It was Irenaeus who defended the apostolicity of the Fourth Gospel by appealing to a tradition circulating in Asia Minor which, he claimed, linked John of Zebedee to the Fourth Gospel. The testimony of Irenaeus, however, makes for very tenuous evidence establishing John of Zebedee as the Fourth Gospel's author. First of all, it turned out that Irenaeus confused John of Zebedee with a presbyter from Asia Minor who was also named John. Secondly, Irenaeus claimed that he got his information about Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel when he was a child from Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. 156) (Perkins: 946). The church tradition that established John as the author of the Fourth Gospel was based, primarily, on Irenaeus' childhood recollections! It is mainly for this reason, in the absence of other supporting evidence, that the majority of biblical scholars today assert that John was *not* the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Brown's research reveals that there was a schism early in the history of the Johannine Community. He posits that the community divided in two due to an internal christological disagreement. The majority of the community, whom Brown refers to as the Secessionists, defended the community's high christology and moved toward Docetism, Montanism, and Gnosticism (Brown 1979: 149). The rest of the community, whom Brown refers to as the Apostolic Christians, were amalgamated into the emerging institutional church. The Apostolic Christians became accepted as "orthodox" believers because they were willing to modify their christological beliefs in order to conform to the teachings of the emerging church hierarchy. The Secessionists, the majority of the Johannine Community, were quickly labeled as "heretics" by the institutional church because they did not make any such modifications. This schism took place before the final canonical redaction of the Fourth Gospel. The final redaction that we have today is the work of an editor belonging to the group which aligned itself with the institutional church. Both groups, however, took their pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel with them after the schism and claimed it as their own (Brown 1979: 149).

My hypothesis includes the assertion that, at the time of the schism, this pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel clearly identified Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple. The Secessionists, as Brown calls them, preserved the tradition of the Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple -- the founder and hero of their community. The Secessionists brought their tradition with them to several Gnostic groups. This explains Mary Magdalene's identification as the Beloved Disciple in several ancient Gnostic documents from a corpus of literature known as the Nag Hammadi Library.

The Apostolic Christians, on the other hand, gravitated toward the institutional church and were pressured into suppressing, among other things, their tradition claiming that a woman was their founder and former leader. The end result of this suppression is the Fourth Gospel as we have it today.

The following outline charts the events which led to the dissemination of the pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel to both "heterodox" and "orthodox" Christians. It is based on the outline from Brown (1979: 166) on the history of the Johannine Community:

FIRST STAGE -- (*mid-50s to late 80s A.D.*): The originating group of the community is led by Mary Magdalene. She is highly esteemed as the primary witness to the Resurrection of Christ. She is recognized as such even by believers who do not belong to this particular community. She is known, very early on, as the companion of Jesus, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. An essential part of their proclamation of the gospel is the fact that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the Risen Christ.

SECOND STAGE -- (*c. 80-90 A.D.*): At this point, the community has a version of their Gospel, either written or

oral, which includes the tradition that Mary Magdalene was their founder, hero, and leader. Mary Magdalene is probably deceased by this time. There is a schism in the community which is most likely the result of an internal dispute about their high christology. The community is divided into two groups which Brown calls the Secessionists, and the Apostolic Christians.

THIRD STAGE -- (c. 90-100 A.D.):

*The Apostolic Christians:* As the church becomes a more organized institution, this group is fearful of ostracism and persecution. They seek amalgamation with the leaders of the emerging institutional church. The claim that a female disciple of Jesus had been their community's first leader and hero quickly becomes an embarrassment. They need to obscure that fact if they are to be accepted by the male leadership of the growing organized church. A redactor in this community reworks their Gospel in order to make it consistent with this obscuration. The result of this redaction is the canonical Fourth Gospel as we have it today.

*The Secessionists:* They are the largest of the two groups. They hold on to their tradition which cites Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple of Jesus. Many members of this community take this tradition to various Gnostic groups. Their identification of Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved is reflected in the Gnostic Christian writings of Nag Hammadi -- e.g., the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*.

The evidence which links authorship of the Fourth Gospel to Mary Magdalene is found in the Gnostic writings of the Nag Hammadi Library. Of particular interest are the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary* (referring to Magdalene).

The Nag Hammadi Library was discovered in 1945 in the area of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Much has been written about it since its publication in the mid-1970s. This library consists of 4th century Coptic manuscripts which are copies of manuscripts originally written in Greek. These manuscripts belonged to Gnostic Christians. Most scholars cite the mid-second century as the earliest plausible date of composition for these documents. However, a few of the documents are said by some to have been written as early as the late first century -- making them contemporary with the New Testament Gospels (Haskins: 34). The importance of this 1945 discovery cannot be overstated.

Let's look at a few important excerpts from the Nag Hammadi Library. This first passage comes to us from the *Gospel of Philip*:

\*\* And the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] by it [and expressed disapproval]. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness" (NHC II.3.63.32ff) (Robinson 1977: 138).\*\*

Another passage from the *Gospel of Philip* reads as follows:

\*\*There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary (NHC II.3.59.6-11) (Robinson 1988: 145).\*\*

The *Gospel of Mary* (referring to the Magdalene) says the following:

\*\*Peter said to Mary, "Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember -- which you know (but) we do not, nor have

we heard them." Mary answered and said, "What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you." (NHC BG 8502.1.10.1-8) (Robinson 1988: 525).\*\*

At this point in the text, Mary Magdalene goes on to tell Peter, Andrew, and Levi about her visions of the Risen Christ and her conversations with the Lord. These visions involve something which she refers to as the seven powers of wrath (NHC BG 8502.1.16.12-13) (Robinson 1988: 526). After she concludes her discourse about her revelations from the Lord, the men argue over whether to accept the authenticity of the Magdalene's vision.

The *Gospel of Mary* concludes as follows:

\*\*When Mary had said this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior had spoken with her. But Andrew answered and said to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas." Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior: "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?" Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man and acquire him for ourselves as he commanded us, and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said." When [...] and they began to go forth [to] proclaim and to preach. (NHC BG 8502.1.17.7ff) (Robinson 1988: 526-527).\*\*

For some reason, there are four pages missing from the account of her revelations in the extant text. In all, ten of the nineteen pages of the *Gospel of Mary* are missing (Robinson 1988: 524, 526).

Clearly, these passages establish as indisputable fact that, at least in some ancient gnostic communities, Mary Magdalene was thought of as having been the "Beloved Disciple" and the companion of the Lord. She is repeatedly singled out as the disciple whom Jesus loved the most. This would seem to contradict the assertion in the Fourth Gospel that the male founder of the Johannine Community is "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). How can there be two strong traditions each identifying two different people as the disciple whom Jesus loved the most? This begins to make sense only if we explore the possibility that, in reality, both of these traditions are referring to the same disciple.

## EXPLORING POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

There is no doubt that the Beloved Disciple in the canonical version of the Fourth Gospel is an anonymous *male* disciple. Yet, as we have seen, the writings of the Nag Hammadi Library reflect a strong tradition repeatedly naming Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved. How do we explain this disturbing contradiction? There are only three possible explanations for this:

1. There is *no connection* between the Fourth Gospel and the Gnostic writings cited here. They simply reflect two different traditions which cite two different people as Jesus' favorite disciple. This is simply a coincidence.
2. *Brown's explanation:* The writers of the Gnostic gospels were influenced by the portrait of Mary Magdalene as an extraordinary proclaimer of the Resurrected Christ. This portrait of Mary Magdalene sparked the Gnostic writers to make her the disciple whom Jesus loved most and the chief recipient of post-resurrectional revelation (Brown 1979: 154). In other words, the Gnostic writers spawned a tradition naming Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple in response to what they had read in the Fourth Gospel. In this scenario, the canonical Fourth Gospel predates the traditions revealed in the writings of Nag Hammadi.
3. *My thesis:* The pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel clearly named Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved, just as the Gnostic writings still do. The Gnostic writings reflect a dependency on the pre-Gospel text which the "Secessionists" brought to the Gnostic groups after the schism (Brown 1979: 149). The rest of the community, Brown's "Apostolic Christians," also had the same pre-Gospel text. They, however, redacted their text in order to make it more acceptable to the emerging institutional church which they wished to join. They quashed references to Mary Magdalene as having been their founder. They, instead, made references in the text to a "Beloved Disciple," but turned the disciple into an anonymous male. In two passages of the text, their redaction attempts to make the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene seem to be two different individuals by having them appear together in the same scenes. (Structural flaws within those passages, discussed below, support this contention.) They did this because they knew that the church leaders would not accept the authenticity of a Gospel written by a woman. As Brown has observed: "The acceptance of the (Fourth) Gospel into the canon...was only at the price of an assurance that it had apostolic origins" (1979: 149). And, in the worldview of the institutional church leaders, no woman's ministry could be deemed apostolic.

Of the three possible explanations, it is the third which is most plausible.

The first explanation can be easily refuted. There is most certainly a connection between the Fourth Gospel and the Gnostic writings cited here. Brown's research shows that the majority of the Johannine Community (the Secessionists) took a pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel with them to the Docetists, the Montanists, and the Gnostics (1979: 149). In addition to this, as we have seen, the Fourth Gospel was very popular among Gnostics well before its acceptance and canonization by the institutional church (Perkins: 946). And Brown points out that there is "abundant evidence of familiarity with Johannine ideas" in the Gnostic writings of Nag Hammadi (1979: 147). There was obviously much contact between the Johannine Community and Gnostic groups very early on. Therefore, it cannot be mere coincidence that Mary Magdalene is cited in the Gnostic writings as the "disciple whom Jesus loved" in much the same way as the anonymous male disciple is cited as such in the Fourth Gospel. The similarities are too striking to dismiss as unrelated.

In order to refute the second explanation, which comes from Brown, we must carefully analyze the internal evidence which supports my thesis.

#### THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE

As previously stated, an important assertion of mine is that a redactor carefully concealed the identity of Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple, by referring to her only as an anonymous disciple. As the redactor reworked the

seven passages cited above which refer to the Beloved Disciple, he simply changed any reference to Mary Magdalene by substituting it with an anonymous reference to the Beloved Disciple or to "another disciple." For most of the document this was fairly easy to do and the resulting text appeared to be congruous. Instead of seeing the Magdalene's name, the reader is simply presented with the anonymous male disciple.

Removing references to Mary Magdalene from most of the story was easy. However, in the course of his work, the redactor was confronted with a problem. The tradition placing Mary Magdalene at the foot of the Cross *and* at the Empty Tomb on Sunday morning was too strong to deny. The Magdalene's presence at both of these events was common knowledge among most early Christian communities. (This is evidenced by the fact that all three of the other New Testament Gospels report her presence at these events.) The redactor could not simply omit any reference to the Magdalene at the Crucifixion or any reference to her as a primary witness to the Resurrection. However, the redactor still wanted to establish the Beloved Disciple as the founder of his community and as an eyewitness to these major events in the work of salvation. This way, he could still maintain that the founder of his community was an eyewitness to the events in the Gospel even though he inexplicably fails to reveal his identity (John 21:24).

At this point, the redactor probably asked himself a question very similar to this one: How can I suppress the knowledge of Mary Magdalene having been the founder of our community without being so obvious as to remove her from the Crucifixion/Resurrection accounts, with which most Christians are already familiar?

The redactor's solution to this problem was actually quite simple. In those two events where he could not deny the presence of the Magdalene, he would rework the text so as to make it appear as if Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple were two different people appearing simultaneously in the same place, at the same time. Consequently, Mary Magdalene and the male Beloved Disciple appear together in the Fourth Gospel in only two passages -- 19:25-27 (at the foot of the Cross) and 20:1-11 (at the Empty Tomb on Sunday morning). ...Isn't that interesting? And it is precisely at these two points that we find some major structural inconsistencies within the text of the Fourth Gospel. Brown discusses the inconsistencies in both of these passages. (That shows that I'm not just reading inconsistencies into passages that have none.) Notably, Brown finds no such structural defects in any of the other passages which contain references to the Beloved Disciple.

#### STRUCTURAL INCONSISTENCIES IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

The passage from the Fourth Gospel which has Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple together at the foot of the Cross reads as follows:

\*\*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said... (John 19:25ff)\*\*

I cut the passage here in order to make a point. The structure of this pericope is very puzzling. In the first sentence (v. 25) we read a list of women standing by the Cross of Jesus. In the second sentence (v. 26) the writer seems to refer to the aforementioned list of women at the Cross when he calls one of them "the disciple whom (Jesus) loved." If one were to read only the portion of the passage cited above, one would readily assume that the Beloved Disciple is one of the women standing by the cross with Jesus' mother. (Read it over to yourself and see if you don't agree.)

The entire passage reads as follows:

\*\*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)\*\*

The original pre-Gospel version of this passage probably referred to Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Through the use of masculine determiners and cases (in Greek), the redactor was able to change the Beloved Disciple into the anonymous male seemingly in mid-thought. The structure of this passage seems a little forced and indicates that it was probably altered as I have asserted.

Brown in no way posits the thesis proposed by me here. However, he did notice the inconsistency between v. 25 and vs. 26-27. At one point in his discussion of this passage he questions why the Beloved Disciple was not included in the list of people standing by the cross in v. 25 (Brown 1970: 922). He noted that the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple were not listed by the other three Gospels as having stood by the cross. He concluded that the mother of Jesus "was specifically mentioned in the tradition that came to the evangelist, as seen in vs. 25, but that the reference to the Beloved Disciple...is a supplement to the tradition" (Brown 1970: 922). Brown sensed, for reasons other than those posited here, that the "Beloved Disciple" seemed oddly out of place in this passage.

If we compare John 19:25-27 with the passage from the *Gospel of Philip* cited previously, we notice some striking similarities.

\*\*There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. His sister and his mother and his companion were each a Mary (NHC II.3.59.6-11) (Robinson 1988: 145).\*\*

The *Gospel of Philip* makes reference to the same group of women that are standing by the Cross in the Fourth Gospel. However, the *Gospel of Philip* clearly cites Mary Magdalene as the "companion" of Jesus. Brown's explanation for this similarity is that the Gnostic writers were somehow influenced by the Fourth Gospel into making Mary Magdalene the disciple whom Jesus loved the most (1979: 154). In other words, as stated previously, he argues that what we read in the *Gospel of Philip* is a reaction to what is written in the canonical Fourth Gospel. This is highly unlikely. Asserting that the writer of the *Gospel of Philip* responded in this way to the Fourth Gospel does not explain why the structural inconsistency appears in this Fourth Gospel passage in the first place. Furthermore, Brown argues that the Gnostics made Mary Magdalene into the Beloved Disciple in response to her portrayal in the Fourth Gospel. However, he does not attempt to explain why the name of the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel is veiled in secrecy in the first place. I believe that the more plausible explanation is that the Gnostic literature cited here reflects the earlier tradition. The redactor of the Fourth Gospel modified that tradition for the reasons stated above.

The Fourth Gospel passage which has Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple together at the Empty Tomb reads as follows:

\*\*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally, the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. (John 20:1-11)\*\*

The structural inconsistencies in this passage are glaring. In his discussion of this pericope Brown observes that "there are an extraordinary number of inconsistencies that betray the hand of an editor who has achieved organization by combining disparate material" (1970: 995). This pericope has also been described as containing "both high drama and confused choreography" (Setzer: 262).

In his comments on John 20:1-11, Brown cites several inconsistencies. One, in particular, that is worth looking at for the purposes of this study is this observation by Brown: "It is not clear when or how Magdalene got back to the tomb in (v.) 11" (1970: 995). Brown notices that there is a broken trail in the travels of Mary Magdalene from one place to another in this pericope:

- In v. 2 Mary Magdalene runs AWAY from the tomb to Peter and the "other disciple" to tell them that the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb. At this point, Mary Magdalene is AWAY from the tomb along with Peter and the "other disciple."
- In v. 3 Peter and the "other disciple" run to the tomb. Mary Magdalene is not mentioned as having returned to the tomb with the two men. She has stayed behind -- still AWAY from the tomb.
- In v. 11 Mary Magdalene is abruptly portrayed as remaining behind weeping at the tomb. However, there is no account of her returning to the tomb in this scene after telling Peter and the "other disciple" that the body of Jesus was missing.

When did Mary Magdalene return to the tomb? The reader loses track of her trail between v. 2 and v. 11. Brown noticed this (1970: 995). I assert that this inconsistency is due to the insertion of her alter ego, the male Beloved Disciple, in vss. 2 thru 10. It is obvious that this passage has had some extensive re-editing done to it. The redactor's effort to conceal the identity of Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple, and make two individuals out of one, has created a muddled account of the Magdalene's whereabouts between vss. 2 and 10 in this passage.

Brown maintains that this passage "has undergone considerable development" (1970: 1001). He considers the possibility that Luke 24:12 reflects an earlier tradition in which Peter runs to the tomb without the other disciple. A pre-canonical version of the Fourth Gospel may have reflected this before the redactor reworked it. Brown asserts that the insertion of the Beloved Disciple into the scene in John 20 was the work of the redactor. In fact, he maintains that it is precisely the introduction of the Beloved Disciple into this text that has caused the inconsistencies which I've discussed here (Brown 1970: 1001).

Setzer describes the insertion of the Beloved Disciple in this passage as a "contrivance" (262). She notes, as does Brown, that the account of Peter and the Beloved Disciple running to the tomb together is "sandwiched between" Mary Magdalene's initial discovery of the Empty Tomb and her first encounter with the Risen Jesus. She asserts that this "contrivance" let the Gospel retain the tradition that Mary Magdalene was the first to discover the Empty Tomb while still giving the Beloved Disciple prominence as the first person to reach the Empty Tomb and believe that Jesus has risen (Setzer: 262).

Setzer's observation is very consistent with the hypothesis that I've proposed here. My thesis also alleges a contrivance on the part of the final editor of the Fourth Gospel. The redactor wanted to maintain that the Gospel was based on the eyewitness testimony of his community's founder and hero. However, he did not wish to admit that this founder and hero was a woman. Yet, he could not very well deny Mary Magdalene's presence at the Crucifixion and the Empty Tomb. So, his "contrivance," as Setzer puts it, was to change Mary Magdalene into an anonymous male disciple throughout the text except in those places where he could not deny her presence due to the strong prior tradition to the contrary. In those scenes, he placed the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene together in the same passages. This accounts for the structural inconsistencies, the confused choreography, and the apparent contrivance.

One other inconsistency which Brown points out (1970: 995) is worth noting here:

\*\*Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (John 20:8-9)\*\*

The contrast between "he saw and believed" in v. 8 and "they still did not understand" in v. 9 is peculiar. Verse 9 is clearly making reference to verse 8. However, the reference is contradictory. This appears to be an attempt to blend two different traditions: one in which the disciples did not immediately understand, or believe in, the Resurrection (Matthew 28:17; Mark 16:11,13; Luke 24:11), and another in which Mary Magdalene, changed here to the "other disciple," instantly perceives the truth (Matthew 28:1,8; Mark 16:9; Luke 24:10).

#### ADDITIONAL SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

Brown draws many conclusions in his research which are consistent with my thesis. Indeed, everything in Brown's profile of the Beloved Disciple is compatible with what is known about Mary Magdalene -- that is, except for her gender.

Brown notes that "the Johannine attitude toward women was quite different from that attested in other first-century Christian churches." He adds: "The unique place given to women (as proclaimers) in the Fourth Gospel reflects the history, the theology, and the values of the Johannine community" (Brown 1979: 183). May I respectfully suggest an additional explanation? Perhaps, the unique place given to women in the Fourth Gospel is due to its having been originally authored by a woman.

Brown suggests that the Johannine picture becomes more understandable if the Beloved Disciple had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and if the disciple began to follow Jesus when Jesus was in fellowship with the Baptist (1979: 32-34). This is certainly a plausible scenario which does not contradict my thesis.

Brown also notes that the Fourth Gospel contains many accurate references to Holy Land places and customs (1979: 22). These references suggest eyewitness authorship by someone who lived in the Holy Land before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. All of these observations by Brown are consistent with a paradigm that includes Mary Magdalene as the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Another factor which tends to support my thesis is the "one-upmanship" of the Beloved Disciple in relation to Peter in the Fourth Gospel (Brown 1979: 31). The juxtapositional relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel is very similar to the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Corpus. This suggests that the redactor of the Fourth Gospel changed Mary Magdalene into the anonymous male disciple but kept the competition motif between the disciple and Peter.

Brown has observed that very often in the Fourth Gospel the Beloved Disciple is explicitly contrasted with Peter. Some of the examples that he points out (Brown 1979: 82-83) are as follows:

- in 13:23-26 the Beloved Disciple is resting on Jesus' chest while Peter has to petition the Disciple to ask Jesus a question for him;
- in 18:15-16 the Beloved Disciple has access to the high priest's palace while Peter does not;
- in 20:2-10 the Beloved Disciple immediately believes in the Resurrection while Peter and the rest of the disciples do not understand;
- in 21:7 the Beloved Disciple is the only one who recognizes the Risen Christ while he speaks from the shore to the disciples on their fishing boat;
- in 21:20-23 Peter jealously asks Jesus about the fate of the Beloved Disciple.

The writings of the Nag Hammadi Library contain this same kind of "one-upmanship" between Peter and Mary Magdalene:

- the *Gospel of Mary* portrays Peter as being jealous of the revelations that the Magdalene got from the Risen Christ (NHC BG 8502.1.17.7ff) (Robinson 1988: 526-527);
- the *Gospel of Thomas* has Peter saying the following about the Magdalene: "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life" (NHC II.2.51.19-20) (Robinson 1988: 138);
- in the *Gospel of Philip* the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is contrasted with Jesus' relationship with the rest of the disciples (NHC II.3.63.32ff) (Robinson 1977: 138; 1988: 148);
- similar examples of Peter being upstaged by Mary Magdalene occur in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and *Pistis Sophia* (Gnostic documents found prior to the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Positing Mary Magdalene as author of the Fourth Gospel does not challenge its apostolic origin. If Mary Magdalene was the leader and hero of the Fourth Gospel's community, then she was probably recognized as an Apostle within that community. Indeed, in recognition of the fact that she was the first to proclaim the Resurrection of Christ, the Roman Catholic Church has honored her with the title *apostola apostolorum* which means "the apostle to the apostles."

In proposing this thesis I am certainly not challenging the integrity of the Fourth Gospel. Nor do I impute specious intent upon any of the Gospel's redactors. It is well known today that the Bible is replete with pseudonymous writings: a common practice in antiquity which was not viewed as dishonest. Despite the redactions and the inconsistencies they may have caused -- the intention of the author, the evangelist, and any subsequent redactors was to proclaim the gospel "in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 19) (Abbott: 124). They also preserved "without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 11) (Abbott: 119). In other words, in concealing the identity of the Beloved Disciple, or making that disciple male rather than female, the redactor was not tampering with any essential tenet of the gospel of Jesus. Therefore, the redactor of the Fourth Gospel was still dispensing the Truth.

Readers should also refrain from assuming or inferring that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had any kind of illicit amorous relationship based on any of the readings cited here. We should not be too quick to look at ancient literature through a "modern lens."

I am certainly making no claim of possessing the final word on this issue. However, the conclusions of this study do not come under the rubric of the "overly imaginative deductions about ecclesiastical history" that Brown warns us about (1979: 19). There are some very compelling reasons for considering the possibility of Mary Magdalene's authorship of the Fourth Gospel:

- there is solid extrabiblical documentary evidence which establishes a strong tradition among, at least some, Gnostic Christians naming Mary Magdalene as the disciple whom Jesus loved the most. This is strong external evidence which corroborates the identification of Mary Magdalene as the Beloved Disciple;
- there is a well-established historical link between the Fourth Gospel and Gnostic Christians which predates both the canonization of the Fourth Gospel and the ascription of its authorship to John of Zebedee (Perkins: 946). This corroborates the hypothesis which says that the Secessionists of the Johannine Community brought their pre-canonical Fourth Gospel with them into the Gnostic Christian communities after the schism;
- there is the strong internal evidence which shows extensive structural inconsistencies in the two passages of the Fourth Gospel which contain both Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple appearing together. This

corroborates the hypothesis which says that a redactor re-edited prior pre-canonical versions of the Fourth Gospel as discussed above;

- the "one-upmanship" of the Beloved Disciple in relation to Peter in the Fourth Gospel is very similar to the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Corpus. This helps to corroborate the hypothesis which says that the Fourth Gospel's Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene are, in reality, one and the same;
- there are many accurate references in the Fourth Gospel to Holy Land places and customs which denote eyewitness authorship by someone who lived in the Holy Land before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 (Brown 1979: 22). Mary Magdalene was most certainly in a position to give very vivid and accurate eyewitness accounts of the events depicted in the Fourth Gospel. This might explain some striking differences between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels which, according to most biblical scholars, were pseudonymous and *not* written by eyewitnesses;
- the unique place given to women as proclaimers in the Fourth Gospel was quite different from that of other first-century Christian churches (Brown 1979: 183). This is very consistent with the hypothesis which says that the Fourth Gospel was, in fact, authored by a woman -- i.e., Mary Magdalene.

Well...I hope that the preceding material has been a "good read" for you. I know that my hypothesis will seem very radical to you -- at least at first. However, before you dismiss it, I want you to consider a few things.

Does this thesis seem radical to you *only* because I propose that a *woman* authored one of the four Holy Gospels in the Bible? If I had a thesis which proposed that Bartholomew, or Andrew, or James, or *any* of the other male apostles authored the Fourth Gospel instead of John -- would that be considered very radical? Probably not. In fact, the church has no problem with the prevailing scholarship which says that a man whose name we don't even know wrote one of the most sacred Christian documents. Imagine -- even a nameless man is preferable to a woman.

What about all of the evidence that I have reviewed for you? Compare that to the basis for which authorship of the Fourth Gospel has been ascribed to John of Zebedee for almost 2,000 years. Most biblical scholars reject that evidence today. (Remember? It was the childhood recollections of Irenaeus.) That is why John's Gospel is considered anonymous by them today. But, alas, the standard of proof for establishing a *woman* as the author of a Gospel is much, much higher. Gnostic documents and structural inconsistencies notwithstanding -- the church-at-large will probably never acknowledge Mary Magdalene as an author of a New Testament Gospel.

Perhaps things haven't really changed that much since the earliest days of the church. Maybe authorship of a Gospel by a woman is still the embarrassment that Setzer says it would have been 2,000 years ago.

Here's something else to think about: Why is Mary Magdalene the most famous harlot in the world when the Bible never says that she was ever a prostitute at any time? Oh, you are sure you recall reading that in the Bible, are you? ...Find it. Send me the biblical citation and I will post it on this website. You'll find my e-mail address further down.

Raymond Brown has likened the quest to identify the author of the Fourth Gospel to a good detective story (1966: lxxxvii). A good detective sifts through evidence which is relevant and discards that which is not. When the evidence begins to point in a certain direction, he or she pursues leads and explores all of the various explanations and alibis. When one theory emerges as plausible and more credible than any other, the detective draws a conclusion that usually involves the naming of a suspect or suspects. The evidence supporting authorship of the Fourth Gospel by Mary Magdalene is much stronger than that which established John of Zebedee as its author for nearly two thousand years. After careful consideration of the evidence cited herein, I respectfully submit that the "prime suspect" in any quest to identify the author of the Fourth Gospel should be Mary Magdalene.

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